

## The Gweagal Shield

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Recounts of Aboriginal Australian history stand as a jarring reminder of the dissonance at the heart of the modern Australian autonomy. Failing to comprehend the truth in a battle of power and knowledge, the Aboriginal story is partly lost, and the modern narrative found, in a tale of coercion and misrepresentation. The colonial process in Australia decimated the original inhabitants, expropriated their lands and dislocated them from their culture (Morris 1989), the systematic consequences of which would continue to be felt through generations. Narration of this discourse masqueraded as fact for many years, insinuated a complicity on the part of Aboriginal Australians in their own demise. As Morris notes, it was as if they had ‘simply faded away’ (1989, p.6). Few clues remain of the ‘other side’ of the frontier, of those who stood in guard of their Australia at the site of first contact with the colonisers

The origins of the silence bring a pained awareness of the efficiency of colonization- what little knowledge remained was often manufactured to ultimately legitimise the process and provide alliance in the creation of a ‘new’ narrative (Morris 1989). The material artefacts of this frontier culture therefore define the margins of anthropological interpretation of the colonial process. The Gweagal Shield, otherwise known as the ‘Stolen Shield’, thought to have been held by ‘Cooman’ when confronted by Cook during their first meeting at Botany Bay. Collected after its owner’s death by Cook, the shield was the beginning of a colossal theft that would be sustained over generations. It may be one of the last material truths legitimising this historical moment and its role in Australia’s story... and it is stored in the British Museum. Its presence stands to subvert the assumption that power was possessed and exercised solely by the coloniser. The ideological counterpart of the Stolen Shield provides a discursive construction of Aboriginal identity in the cultural space of the frontier (Morris 1992). By necessity, it has become a symbol of how the Aboriginal Australians survived against every effort of their colonisers to eradicate them.

In the underlying contextual assumptions of the settler colonial mentality, concerning Indigenous populations, ‘*where* they are was *who* they are’ (Wolfe 2006, p.388). Their place constitutes their identity, ‘all the native has to do is stay at home’ (Wolfe 2006, p.388) and



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the settler narrative will construct the rest in accordance with what is needed. The primary motive for the elimination of this identity is therefore not race, but territory. On a symbolic level, modern interactions with the Aboriginal Australian identity, particularly of the British Museum as the current keeper of the Stolen Shield, has sought to recuperate indigeneity not only in the 'ostentatious borrowing of Aboriginal motifs' (Wolfe 2006, 389), but withhold their artefacts. This contradictory reappropriation of a disavowed sense of Aboriginal Australian identity ideologically justifies that the dispossession of the Aboriginal Australian culture 'was so that 'we' could use the land better than they could' (Wolfe 2006, p.389). The diminution of native claims was essential to the control of the settler narrative, just as the plight of the Aboriginal Australian community to bring the Stolen Shield home is ignored for the sake of a modern narrative.

The Stolen Shield may well have been the first defence from the British colonisation. The events following meant the breaking down of native title into alienable individual freeholds, where coercion, forced assimilation, conversion, and massacres were deemed necessary in order to settle on 'new' land (Wolfe 2006). The Gweagal Shield ultimately stands as the first marker of the violent discourse that consumed Australia under the hand of British sovereignty. The ability to tell this truth relies on the process of listening to refute the colonial myths created out of 'need' for territory- the need for more land to sustain life and power. In this, we seek to attain a point of common understanding between our shared narrative, guided by the voices and stories of the past Aboriginal Australians, free from the veil of silence.

## References

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