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# **A PREHISTORY OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORY WARS: THE EVOLUTION OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY DURING THE 1970S AND 1980S**

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While an extensive debate has recently addressed more contemporary contributions to historical scholarship, the historiographical background to Australia's History Wars has rarely been appraised. This article proposes an interpretative narrative of the evolution of Aboriginal history during the 1970s and 1980s. While before the late 1960s a systematic historiography of Aboriginal-white relations did not exist, these decades have witnessed the emergence and consolidation of Aboriginal history as an established academic discipline. The 1970s saw the 'detection' of Aboriginal persistence and resistance and the historiographical tradition established during this decade insisted on the contested nature of the invasion process. Conversely, during the 1980s, an interpretative tradition stressing Indigenous agency, transformation and adaptation shifted the focus of historiographical attention.

During the 1970s and 1980s what had previously been considered the domain of anthropologists, ethnologists and archaeologists became an interest of historians as well.<sup>1</sup> While initially historians concentrated on challenging the image of Australia as the 'quiet continent' and unqualified descriptions of Aboriginal destruction, a second moment of historiographical reinterpretation shifted the focus of historiographical attention towards Aboriginal-white relations after the end of the hostilities on the Australian frontier.<sup>2</sup> Throughout a recent outbreak of Australia's "History Wars", Keith Windschuttle assumed

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<sup>1</sup> See D. J. Mulvaney, "The Australian Aborigines, 1606-1929; Opinion and Fieldwork, Part 1 and Part 2", in Eastwood J. J., Smith F. B. (eds.), *Historical Studies: Selected Articles* (Melbourne, 1964), pp. 1-56.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Read, "Unearthing the Past is not Enough", *Island*, 52 (1992), pp. 49-53; B. Attwood, "Aborigines and Academic Historians: Some Recent Encounters", *Australian Historical Studies*, 24, 94 (1990), pp. 123-135; B. Attwood, "Aboriginal History", in John A. Moses (ed.), *Historical Disciplines in Australasia: Themes, problems and Debates*, a special issue of *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 41 (1995), pp. 33-47; B. Attwood, "Historiography on the Australian Frontier" in B. Attwood, Stephen G. Foster (eds.), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience* (Canberra, 2003), pp. 169-184; B. Attwood, S. Foster, "Introduction", in Bain Attwood, Stephen G. Foster (eds.), *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, cit., pp. 1-29; and Anna Haebich, "The Battlefields of Aboriginal History", in Martyn Lyons, Peggy Russell (eds.), *Australia's History: Themes and Debates* (Sydney, 2005), pp. 1-21.

that practitioners of Aboriginal history form a coherent group in their thinking. However, these ‘wars’ were preceded by a long, complicated and strongly contested process of historiographical transition.<sup>3</sup> This article shows how many contributed to the development of the discipline, that there were many incremental interpretative steps and that Windschuttle crucially ignored the shifts, diversity and subtleties of the debates of the 1970s and 1980s.

This is a significant dynamic and should not be overlooked. Bain Attwood has recently and compellingly noted in *Rights for Aborigines* how the historiographical activity of the 1960s and 1970s was essential in providing a story, written narratives of Aboriginal history to the political advocacy of Aboriginal peoples and their non-Aboriginal supporters and in eventually preparing the basis for the institutional shifts that culminated with the ‘Mabo’ decision of the High Court in 1992.<sup>4</sup> This article proposes a selective and thematic interpretation of the transformations of Aboriginal history in the early decades of its evolution.<sup>5</sup>

#### a) The “Fringe-dwellers of Australian Historiography”<sup>6</sup>

Surveys of the evolution of Aboriginal history as a scholarly enterprise should depart from W. E. H. Stanner’s 1968 Boyer lectures and from his landmark denunciation of previous erasures:

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<sup>3</sup> See R. Manne, “In Denial: The Stolen Generation and the Right”, *Quarterly Essay*, 1 (2001); K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen’s Land, 1803-1847* (Sydney, 2002); R. Manne (ed.), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle’s Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Sydney, 2003); S. Macintyre, A. Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne, 2003); J. Dawson, *Washout: On the Academic Response to the Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Sydney, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> B. Attwood, *Rights for the Aborigines* (Sydney, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See R. H. W. Reece, “The Aborigines in Australian Historiography”, in J. A. Moses (ed.), *Historical Disciplines and Culture in Australasia*, cit., pp. 253-281, L. Coltheart, *The Breaking of the Great Australian Silence: Aborigines in Australian Historiography, 1955-1983* (London, 1984); H. Reynolds, *The Breaking of the Great Australian Silence: Aborigines in Australian Historiography, 1955-1983* (London, 1984); B. Thorpe, “Frontiers of Discourse. Assessing Revisionist Australian Colonial Contact Discourse”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 46 (1995), pp. 34-45; R. Broome, “Historians, Aborigines and Australia: Writing the National Past”, in B. Attwood (ed.), *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia* (Sydney: 1996), pp. 54-72, 162-166; and A. Curthoys, “Aboriginal History”, in G. Davison, J. Hirst, S. Macintyre (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* (Melbourne, 1998), pp. 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> H. Reynolds, *Aborigines and Settlers* (Melbourne, 1972), p. ix.

let me make the point that inattention [to the Aboriginal experience] on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent mindness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale.<sup>7</sup>

Stanner was criticising an established interpretative tradition epitomised by Manning Clark's treatment of Aboriginal history, a treatment characterised by an irreversible location of Aboriginality in a prehistorical past:

[f]or apart from fire, the stone implements he used for hunting and food gathering, and the rock paintings on which he portrayed his vision of the world, the Aborigine handed on to posterity few other memorials of his encounter with the weird and harsh land his people had occupied since time immemorial.<sup>8</sup>

Stanner's departure has been frequently mentioned in the work of the historiographers of Aboriginal history.<sup>9</sup> His following remark was also a significant one: "[w]e have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines [sic] that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so".<sup>10</sup> Stanner recognised two important aspects that are in many ways still relevant: in the first place, that the majority of the public and academic opinions were inclined to portray a very partial view of the historical landscape, and secondly, that the problem was not to be addressed simply by an exercise in nominal acknowledgement of Aboriginal peoples and their presence. Stanner noted that those who wanted to overcome the cult of forgetfulness were also facing notable difficulties.

Following his denunciation, the silence that had until then surrounded the experience of the Aboriginal people was progressively transformed into a multivocal debate. However, while a process of collective revision of received historical narratives would be a slow one,

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<sup>7</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming* (Sydney, 1968), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> M. Clark, *A Short History of Australia, Revised Edition* (New York, 1969), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> See B. Attwood, "The past as Future: Aborigines, Australia and the (Dis)Course of History", in Bain Attwood (ed.), *In the Age of Mabo*, cit., pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>10</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, cit, p. 25.

Aboriginal issues and narratives involving Aboriginal peoples gradually gained visibility in the academic world (and in growing sectors of the public opinion). The disciplinary boundaries that had assigned the study of Aboriginal peoples to anthropologists and experts in material cultures were also being comprehensively reorganised. As a result, during this phase ‘Aboriginal history’ and ‘Aboriginal studies’ were established as independent academic disciplines.<sup>11</sup> In the end, while Aboriginal history was authoritatively assessed and documented, a ‘violent’ narrative of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people became a prominent feature of this historical scholarship. However, the breaking of the “great Australian silence” and the discovery of Aboriginal resistance during the later half of the 1970s were carried out without admitting that Aboriginal resisters possessed an autonomous capacity for change or effective opposition. In fact, empathy for Aboriginal resisters did not imply readiness or ability to allow for Aboriginal agency.

D. J. Mulvaney’s *The Prehistory of Australia*, published a year after Stanner’s Boyer lectures, also argued for a reassessment of the Aboriginal presence:

[t]he dispersal of the Aborigines throughout this vast land, their responses and adjustments to the challenges of this harsh environment, and their economical utilization of its niggardly resources, are stimulating testimony to the achievements of the human spirit in the face of adversity.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the tenets of an entrenched historical orthodoxy were here being challenged. The whole of Australia, for example, had been occupied by Aboriginal communities and for a considerably longer period than it was previously assumed. More importantly, Aboriginal people had been able to meet the challenges posed by a harsh environment and the evolution of their economic systems did represent a considerable achievement. While these themes also pertained to an established ethnographic tradition that had always emphasised the ‘nobility’

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<sup>11</sup> See also G. Cowlishaw, “Studying Aborigines: Changing Canons in Anthropology and History”, in Attwood B., Arnold J. (eds.), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines* (Melbourne, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> D. J. Mulvaney, *The Prehistory of Australia* (London, 1969), p. 12.

of ‘uncorrupted’ Aboriginal ways, in the context of the emerging debate on Aboriginality, Mulvaney’s words constituted a point of departure.<sup>13</sup>

The following year, C. D. Rowley started the publication of his trilogy dedicated to the experience of Aboriginal people.<sup>14</sup> It was a timely publication: during the 1960s the pace of political change had acquired momentum. Until then,

Aboriginal affairs had been neglected by social scientists other than anthropologists, and the result was a dearth of ideas in such fields as economics and politics [...] By 1964-7 economic and other changes were weakening the foundations of the caste relationship of black to white within Australia, and there was a new questioning of the White Australia myth. This was the merest trend, but the time seemed right for a comprehensive report - to the nation, to governments, and especially to the Aboriginal people. Though the last were beginning to be heard in new places, above all they needed to know how things got the way they are.<sup>15</sup>

Rowley’s work represented the coming together of different expertise (history, anthropology, social sciences) and the beginning of what would later become Aboriginal studies. His historical narrative displayed most of the ‘catastrophic’ features characterising the historiography of the 1970s: in the first instance, the failure of colonial administrations could not prevent ruthless dispossession and unchecked expansion; later, the destruction of Aboriginal society had followed, and the various frontiers were replaced by settled communities. Yet this was seen as an inevitable process: whereas the failure of colonial administrations was an issue, the possibility that Aboriginal resistance could have been effective to a certain degree was not considered. Rowley’s interpretative framework was to be an extraordinarily long-lasting: only at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, in completely altered conditions, a conflicting thesis would finally consolidate and challenge the myth of the unqualified “destruction of Aboriginal society”.

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<sup>13</sup> See also G. Blainey, *Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia* (Melbourne 1975).

<sup>14</sup> C. D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (Melbourne, 1972); C.D. Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia* (Melbourne, 1972); C. D. Rowley, *The Remote Aborigines* (Melbourne: 1972).

<sup>15</sup> C. D. Rowley, *The Remote Aborigines*, cit. pp. vii-viii.

However, the turning point in the ultimate detection of Aboriginal resistance came with *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*.<sup>16</sup> The pattern of experience that it described was a three-phased one: firstly, a war over resources, fought by “almost completely antagonistic cultural patterns of existence”, secondly, the “exploitation of the Aboriginal remnant”, and, thirdly, the attempt at sheer extermination of the Aboriginal population.<sup>17</sup> While the incompatibility between European and Aboriginal patterns of land use (and hence the inevitability of a war of expulsion or extermination) enjoyed a wide currency during this interpretative phase, the idea that Aboriginal communities had been consistently able and willing to fight a war of resistance was undoubtedly innovative. Most of the literature that followed would need to acknowledge a similar approach.<sup>18</sup> In *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, a welter of evidence was supplied to support the notion of a generalised ‘frontier war’. The orthodox vision of a ‘tranquil’ frontier became strongly and authoritatively contested:

Indeed, it does not seem ungenerous to surmise that the liberal historian finds the whole problem of racial violence an uncomfortable one and moves away from it with relief, for it does not fit easily within his tacit assumptions that the story of Australia is one of ‘lucky’, hopeful and relatively uninterrupted progress, that human decisions there arise from motives that are predominantly rational, and that human activities are governed, in the main, by legality and consensus.<sup>19</sup>

This critique of mainstream Australian historiography, departing from the issue of violence and more specifically of racial violence, was consciously and explicitly attacking established historians such as A. G. L. Shaw, W. K. Hancock, Geoffrey Blainey and Russel Ward. If one was to trace (retroactively) the origin of the partition of Australian historiography along the ‘black armband’ divide, this would most probably be one defining moment (of course, 1975 - the year *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* was initially

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<sup>16</sup> R. Evans, K. Saunders, K. Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination* (Brisbane, 1975). See also H. Reynolds, “Violence, the Aborigines and the Australian Historian”, *Meanjin*, 4, 1972, pp. 471-477.

<sup>17</sup> R. Evans, K. Saunders, K. Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, cit. pp. 29, 102-117.

<sup>18</sup> See also F. Robinson, B. York, *The Black Resistance: An Introduction to the History of the Aborigines’ Struggle against British Colonialism* (Melbourne, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> R. Evans, K. Saunders, K. Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*, cit. pp. 34-35.

published – was the year in which other divides in Australian society and politics also became entrenched).

This was a crucial moment for Australian historiography, especially because Aboriginal resistance was by now an issue going beyond the mere breaking of the “great Australian silence”. Historians such as Ray Evans and Henry Reynolds (who had already published a collection of documents on frontier violence) were denouncing the interpretation of Australian history that had its pillars in the notion of a placid, uncontested frontier reproducing a pacified society thereafter - a frontier also shaped in its constituent character by its distance from the colonising metropolis. Instead, a new generation of historians was now arguing for an interpretation that acknowledged both the extreme violence on the frontier and the fact that the colonisation of the continent had been more Australian than British, carried out by settlers moving out of Australian cities under the political control of Australian interests. For these historians it was, literally and ironically, a matter of liberating Australian historiography from the tyranny of ‘the Australian legend’ and from the legend of the ‘tyranny of distance’.<sup>20</sup>

Resulting from this historiographical activity and marking in a way the coming of age of Aboriginal history as an academic enterprise, a specialised journal entirely devoted to the study of Aboriginal history commenced publication in 1977. Deliberately pursuing a policy that included different disciplinary approaches, this journal charted for two decades the evolution of historical debates surrounding Aboriginal issues. A contribution by Stanner opened this new journal: he identified Aboriginal-white relations as characterised by the impossibility of coexistence, a trait that featured prominently in other works published during the same period. He interpreted Aboriginal survival according to a confined definition:

[the] colonists’ ‘mania’ - the word is their own - for stock and land soon disclosed as axiomatic that ‘a hunting and pastoral economy cannot co-exist within the same bounds’. Consequently, Aboriginal society survived only outside the pastoral bounds. [...] there was more than an accidental correspondence between the ruin of

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<sup>20</sup> R. Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958); G. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia’s History* (Melbourne, 1966).



Aboriginal, and the making of European, life in Australia. There was, in fact, a functional concomitance.<sup>21</sup>

Again, however, the possibility that Aboriginal people could retain a strong sense of traditional identity (and a capacity for resistance) while facing the European presence was not considered in Stanner's text. According to his interpretation, the destruction of Aboriginal society was, by definition, the inevitable consequence of contact and not the qualified result of the development of local processes. Some of the historical literature that followed, while acknowledging Stanner's groundbreaking contribution, would depart from this assumption and review comprehensively narratives of destruction associated with the pastoral economy.

Unqualified destruction, then, still remained the main interpretative paradigm during phase, and *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri*, dedicated to the history of the Aboriginal people of the Murray district of South Australia, also exemplified this trend. Of course, Graham Jenkins maintained that "the [Ngarrindjeri] nation [...] was bound to be destroyed"; however, his approach was also innovative. He identified the Aboriginal experience as a true 'Australian story and compared Aboriginal dispossession to

one of those glorious defeats with which Australian history in general seems to be studded: of people trying to do the impossible, and, miraculously, very nearly succeeding. It is redolent of Eureka, Glenrowan and Gallipoli.<sup>22</sup>

It was an early and explicit attempt to incorporate Aboriginal resistance within the mainstream historical experience of the nation. Aboriginal history was to be established among the founding episodes of the national conscience and to be shown in a most positive light. Yet, inevitably, this resistance would necessarily encounter defeat. As the author stressed, of "the thirty to forty 'tribes' which owned what is now called South Australia, only one has survived the European invasion with its traditional cultural and governmental structure still more or less intact [...]".<sup>23</sup> In this case, Aboriginal resistance had been 'detected' and the moral status of Aboriginal resisters enhanced; what was still

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<sup>21</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, "The History of Indifference Thus Begins", *Aboriginal History*, 1 (1977), pp. 22, 23.

<sup>22</sup> G. Jenkins, *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri: The Story of the Lower Murray Lakes Tribes* (Adelaide, 1979), p. 11.

unacknowledged was an Aboriginal capacity to successfully resist invasion and maintain a status of 'uncorrupted' authenticity.

Afterwards, another series of Boyer lectures, in 1980, by art historian Bernard Smith, constituted a landmark in Aboriginal historiography. According to Smith's reading, "The spectre of Truganini", representing the 'ghosts' of invasion, brutal dispossession and merciless extermination, had "haunted Australian culture" since its formation, and, Smith argued, its presence was being continuously felt. Smith's psychoanalytic approach set out to understand the "ways in which the crimes committed against Aboriginal society have been suppressed and removed from our nation's memory".<sup>24</sup> Yet - no matter how long lasting and comprehensive the attempts to erase it - the collective bad conscience of the nation would continue to haunt the Australian psyche. Smith had identified an unresolved and paralysing national trauma:

[o]ur special Australian problem is the recency of our historical society. Between our history and our pre-history, between our Eden and the expulsion of 1788, lies a lawless terrain in which our courts stumble. 'Primitive accumulation', Marx once wrote, 'plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology'. And this for us has all been so recent. We have been caught out as it were red-handed playing the genocide game, corrupting Darwinism for our purposes as the Nazis once corrupted Nietzsche, and Stalin corrupted Marx, using our own version of history and our own versions of the law to legitimate our questionable actions.<sup>25</sup>

In the final section of his lectures Smith was also making practical suggestions for a new compact with the Aboriginal people. The exhibition of the trauma of dispossession and genocide - Smith was utilising this term - was accompanied by proposals for a treaty that would recognize the sovereignty of the Aboriginal people. He envisaged the year 2000 as a possible deadline for the completion of this transition and the healing of the trauma. He was over-optimistic.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> B. Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini* (Sydney, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> B. Smith, *The Spectre of Truganini*, cit. p. 52.

The following year, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* argued for a thorough revision of Tasmanian and thence Australian history.<sup>26</sup> Lyndall Ryan challenged the most resilient paradigm of a Tasmanian historical orthodoxy; that the Tasmanian Aborigines had finally disappeared at the end of nineteenth century. Tasmanian history was an exceptionally contested ground: the ‘conspiracy of silence’ assumed here a more paradigmatic meaning than elsewhere in Australia while Aboriginal communities were typically denied in their claims to identify as Aboriginal (perhaps for this reason, Tasmania would recurrently surface as an especially contested site of historical debate). However, while filling a gap, Ryan’s work was also responding to Aboriginal demands: challenging received notions of Aboriginal ‘originality’, it also constituted a step towards the redefinition of which communities and which individuals could define themselves according to their Aboriginal heritage. Historians such as Ryan were not only providing Australian history with accounts of ‘the other side of the frontier’; they were also empowering Aboriginal communities with a stronger sense of their autonomous and ‘unassimilated’ history. Besides, during this phase, detecting and documenting survival, rather than extermination was becoming functional to Aboriginal claims. This approach represented a major transition from a historiography that had until then mainly underlined irreversible disruption.

*Aboriginal Australians*, by Richard Broome, was published in its first edition in 1982. It immediately became standard reading, witnessing a long-lasting success; it was reprinted nine times before being republished in a second and third edition in 1994 and 2002. For its emphasis on resistance, *Aboriginal Australians* represented the culmination of the process of ‘discovery’ of Aboriginal resistance. Quite importantly, Broome interpreted ‘resistance’ in way that insisted on “cultural resistance amidst destruction”, and insisted on a strong continuity between nineteenth century opposition to invading Europeans and contemporary struggles for recognition.<sup>27</sup> The interpretative framework it proposed linked two apparently discontinuous periods of Aboriginal struggle, highlighting how resistance had continued after the period of armed confrontation had ended and local clans had ‘moved in’ into pastoral stations.

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<sup>26</sup> See L. Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (Sydney, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> R. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: Black Response to White Dominance, 1788-1980* (Sydney, 1982), pp. 52-68.

In another way, Broome's work also represented a crucial transition. The interpretation of pastoralism it proposed could be interpreted as a transitory compromise between the 'catastrophic' images of the 1970s, epitomised by Stanner's account, and later interpretations:

[d]espite the exploitation of Aboriginal labor, the cattle station in a sense provided a breathing space for Aboriginal culture. This was because the bosses were not interested in what the Aborigines believed as long as they performed their jobs. [...] Thus Aboriginal culture was not attacked. Indeed, most Aborigines of mixed descent participated in traditional life as well. [...] traditional life persisted long after contact.<sup>28</sup>

While unqualified defeat was still understood as inevitable, Pastoralism was now identified and represented as a site of Aboriginal survival rather than devastation.

The Penguin edition of *The Other Side of the Frontier* also appeared in 1982.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that Queensland (especially North Queensland) was a crucial location in the general process of historical revision of the Aboriginal experience. The reasons for this may be linked with Queensland Government policies regarding Aboriginal rights at the time and with the nature of the political climate during the Bjelke-Petersen era. Outside Queensland, a large publishing house had, after a period of indecision, finally committed itself to publishing a historical narrative dealing primarily with Aboriginal Australia during nineteenth century. It was an indication that Aboriginal history was now abandoning academic or 'militant' locations and involving a much wider readership: the 'great Australian silence' had been broken for good.

Reynolds presented and popularised a solid interpretation of Aboriginal resistance and a paradigmatic model of race relations on the Australian frontier. Most of all, in its attempt to provide an Aboriginal view of the process - the 'other side', the side that had been so extensively neglected by previous historical reconstructions - it contributed dramatically to the process of incorporation of the Aboriginal experience into mainstream narratives of

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<sup>28</sup> R. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, cit. p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (Melbourne, 1982).

nineteenth century Australia. Aboriginal agency was the most important interpretative novelty of Reynolds' book. A close observation of the Aboriginal experience from 'the other side of the frontier' showed Aboriginal success in gathering intelligence on Europeans, in culturally responding to European presence and commodities, and in modifying fighting tactics in order to counter mounted opponents and fire power. Moreover, by producing figures on European casualties and on the toll Aboriginal resistance had imposed on pioneer communities, Reynolds was able to not only 'detect' Aboriginal resistance, but also to localise and quantify it and to emphasise that the decrease in the intensity of violence had often been the result of a negotiating process.

Noel Loos' *Invasion and Resistance* also concentrated on the strategies and choices that informed Aboriginal resistance.<sup>30</sup> Loos' book, as well as Reynolds', was the result of a remarkable period of historical research and activity carried out at the James Cook University in Townsville.<sup>31</sup> Consistently with Reynolds' work, the main interpretative innovation represented by *Invasion and Resistance* dealt with the appraisal of the outcomes of Aboriginal resistance. While previous narratives of Indigenous resistance shared the notion that, while perhaps commendable, it had been futile, Loos identified in the 'rainforest frontier' a model of Aboriginal success in enforcing a compromise with settlers.<sup>32</sup> While this accommodation would not be implemented after economic development and increased immigration altered the balances of power, this would happen only at a later stage. In fact, only the undertaking of an unwritten treaty had convinced local clans to abandon their guerrilla-style campaign.<sup>33</sup>

Aboriginal resistance as an interpretative category was now fully established; now the debate was moving towards interpreting its efficacy. *Invasion and Resistance*, *The Other Side of the Frontier* and *Aboriginal Australians* had considered Aboriginal violence and resistance without assuming it to be a doomed enterprise. Loos reappraised only a localised episode, and a transitory one, and yet Loos' example of Aboriginal success constituted, at least

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<sup>30</sup> N. Loos, *Invasion and Resistance: Aboriginal-European Relations on the North Queensland Frontier, 1861-1897* (Canberra, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> See H. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History* (Melbourne, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> N. Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, cit. pp. 88-118.

<sup>33</sup> See also H. Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People* (Melbourne, 1995).

retrospectively, a real breakthrough in a literature that had until then romanticised a hopeless if heroic struggle. This new historiography had concluded that in some areas Aboriginal communities had been able to cope autonomously and effectively with the invasion of their land; that they had also been able to adapt successfully to the new circumstances and to reorganise their fighting tactics and strategic approach according to new military challenges and circumstances. The historiography of the following decade would also develop the theme of Aboriginal adaptation and flexibility and convincingly argue for a reassessment of Aboriginal agency on the frontier.

#### **b) “Victims and Voyagers”<sup>34</sup>**

By the beginning of the 1980s some scholars were beginning to feel dissatisfied with approaches mainly interested in denouncing past atrocities and mistreatment. As Diane Barwick very effectively summarised,

revisionist accounts of Aboriginal history are now fashionable, but their writers seem to commemorate examples of confrontation with more eagerness than they describe the process of accommodation... They commend Aborigines... who returned violence for violence. They ignore, or else dismiss as turncoats, ‘trusties’ and ‘Uncle Toms’, those Aboriginal men and women who were apparently willing to negotiate with the invaders - and sufficiently wily to exploit them.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the dynamics of cultural changes had not been extensively investigated. A preoccupation with the breakdown of ‘traditional’ culture had left most Aboriginal people in the ambiguous position of ‘having lost their culture’. A new critique of the very concept of ‘Aboriginal history’, discerning in its 1970s versions an approach repositing in some ways colonialist attitudes, was also developed. For example, Louise Coltheart has suggested that

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<sup>34</sup> R. Broome, “Aboriginal Victims and Voyagers, Confronting Frontier Myths”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 42 (1994), pp. 70-77.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in R. Broome, “Aboriginal Victims and Voyagers, Confronting Frontier Myths”, cit. p. 71.

the function of the annexation of the Aboriginal past to Australian history is ironically, powerfully and tragically analogous to the colonisation process it records. Writing about Aborigines is necessarily the imposition of an alien explanatory framework on Aboriginal experience and Aboriginal understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Coherently, Coltheart also distinguished “between history about Aborigines and Aboriginal history”.<sup>37</sup> According to this line of interpretation, the history of Aboriginal dispossession was being now appropriated by academics operating “a kind of epistemological expropriation”.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the point at stake was not only epistemological; some scholars were arguing against interpretations that endorsed the view that dispossession had (however unfortunately) worked to such an unrestricted extent that Aboriginal people had retained neither their land nor their identities. For some Aboriginal communities it was a crucial point: continuity of occupation and, in particular, continuity in identity practices was functional to their struggles and demands. Historical narratives that stressed discontinuity and dislocation - even when attributing to these processes a different moral judgement than traditional settler narratives - were now perceived as problematic. The case of the Tasmanian Aboriginal communities of the Foveaux Strait is a good example of this paradox: on the one hand, the historical thesis of genocide stressed the inhumanity of dispossession and invasion; on the other hand, the historical fact of a colonial genocide was deliberately used to deny these communities the special status they were demanding.<sup>39</sup>

A new interpretative position emerged, proposing a reading in which the stress on frontier violence would be replaced by a focus on accommodation and Aboriginal agency. As Stuart Macintyre would later summarise,

[t]here are also historians sympathetic to the Aboriginal cause who query the emphasis on frontier violence and destruction, suggesting that the martial

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<sup>36</sup> L. Coltheart, “The Moment of Aboriginal History”, in J. Beckett, J. (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality* (Canberra 1994), p 183.

<sup>37</sup> L. Coltheart, “The Moment of Aboriginal History”, cit. p. 181. See also C. Johnson, “Captured Discourse, Captured Lives”, *Aboriginal History*, 11, 2 (1987), pp. 27-32; and H. Fourmile, “Who Owns the Past? Aborigines as Captives of the Archives” *Aboriginal History*, 13 (1989), pp. 1-9.

<sup>38</sup> L. Coltheart, “The Moment of Aboriginal History”, cit. p. 184.

<sup>39</sup> See also L. Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (Sydney, 1996).

interpretation fails to understand Aboriginal actions in their own terms. The pastoral incursion was undoubtedly traumatic. Indigenous population shrank dramatically (one national estimate suggests from 600,000 to less than 300,000 between 1821 and 1850), but disease, malnutrition and infertility were the principal causes: perhaps only one death in ten was caused directly by white violence. Aboriginal survivors responded to this disaster with a variety of strategies, and accommodation was one of them.<sup>40</sup>

Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle*, for example, proposed an interpretation in which Aboriginal agency was finally and fully acknowledged.<sup>41</sup> Focussing on the pastoral industry of the Northern Territory, this book was able to extensively use oral sources - a procedure unavailable in other parts of the country.<sup>42</sup> The interpretation of the pastoral frontier it provided was innovative in two important respects. Firstly, it challenged

the myth that Aboriginal culture was unable to change; we may think the cattle economy swamped Aborigines, but in fact they have incorporated cattle life into their world, consciously adapting and integrating it. Cattle management has become 'traditional': the Lingarra mob of the Victoria River district wants to use a footprint symbol for their cattle brand. This signifies an important dreaming site, where the spirits first stood on the earth, leaving a large imprint in the rock.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, it was based on a model of conflict that stressed active Aboriginal decision-making. It was a far reaching transformation: while in previous analyses, pastoralism had been considered a medium of Aboriginal destruction, In McGrath's vision the pastoral economy and the land use it entailed, far from being a way in which Aboriginal society had been irreversibly undermined, became a vehicle for survival: "Aborigines used the cattle station for their own purposes; they managed to secure European goods, as well as maintain

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<sup>40</sup> S. Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Melbourne, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> A. McGrath, *"Born in the Cattle": Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney, 1987).

<sup>42</sup> See also D. B. Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations* (Canberra, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> A. McGrath, *"Born in the Cattle"*, cit. pp. ix-x.



links with their land and follow the precepts of Aboriginal law”.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, what had happened in the Northern pastoral frontier might have happened elsewhere in Australia and be more difficult if not impossible to record.

Reynolds’ *Frontier* also recommended that the historiographies of the northern and southern halves of the continent should not be separated.<sup>45</sup> The main contention of Reynolds’ volume was that local developments had been variations of the same theme and that a single interpretative framework could be devised to deal with Australian frontiers since 1788.<sup>46</sup> While part of the academic debate had moved on and was re-assessing consensual Aboriginal participation in European enterprises, Reynolds was providing a wider readership with an organised version of the outcomes of decades of historical rewriting. The discovery of the “unrecorded battlefields” of Australian history was now summarised and made accessible.<sup>47</sup> *Frontier* proposed a synthesis of the historical process of dispossession and a set of historical images that had progressively become powerful in the consciousness of the public. It was an interpretative pattern that had by then comprehensively replaced previous pre-1970s orthodox received narratives. Conflict and violence on the frontier had not been negligible; Aboriginal presence and contributions had to be emphasised:

[w]hat happens to our interpretation of land settlement if the Aborigines are brought into the story? Many changes must be made. Clearly the Europeans did not enter an empty land or a wilderness; rather they moved across a country shaped by thousands of years of firestick farming, turned a long-settled land to new uses and in the process were often heavily dependent on Aboriginal knowledge and expertise. Violence was endemic on the frontier - the pioneer was accompanied by a ‘line of blood’. The Aborigines had to be physically removed and their title extinguished; the settlers fought the blacks before they fought the land. The gun accompanied the bullock dray and preceded the plough. The prolonged conflict was, by general consensus, a sort of warfare.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>45</sup> H. Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney, 1987).

<sup>46</sup> However, Robert Reece, for example maintained that a nationwide approach should be rejected. See R. H. W. Reece, “Inventing Aborigines”, *Aboriginal History*, 11, 1987, pp. 14-23.

<sup>47</sup> H. Reynolds, *Frontier*, cit. pp. 3-31, 32-57.

<sup>48</sup> H. Reynolds, *Frontier*, cit. p. 189.

Coherently, Reynolds concentrated on Aboriginal title and the ways Europeans had used to extinguish it: *The Law of the Land*, published the same year, consisted of a detailed analysis of the nature of Aboriginal customary tenure and its relation to European legal doctrine.<sup>49</sup> Aiming to find a viable solution to the legal problems raised by native title, Reynolds had extensively researched the official correspondence and the British Parliamentary Papers.<sup>50</sup> For example, the ‘Letters Patent’ with which the Colony of South Australia had been established expressed

a clear definition of native title as understood in other parts of the Empire. The Aborigines had rights - property rights. They should continue to enjoy those rights of possession which could and should be inherited by their descendants like any other forms of property. It was significant that the same clause, without any substantial change of wording, was used in the Charter which established New Zealand as a separate colony in December 1840 and provided for Maori native title.<sup>51</sup>

There had been no treaty with Indigenous peoples in Australia; nonetheless, the legal acknowledgment of Aboriginal title had been sustained by British authorities (and never been explicitly disclaimed by Australian ones). It was a crucial interpretative proposition, a position that, a few years later, would contribute to the transformation of Australian legal practice. *The Law of the Land* would be timely republished in 1992, after the High Court endorsed this approach in the ‘Mabo’ case.

The year of the ‘bicentenary’, was a crucial year in the historiography of Australia and Aboriginal issues, voices and history could not be excluded as they had been in previous commemorations.<sup>52</sup> One example of this trend was apparent in *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace*, which contained a section dedicated to Aboriginal-European warfare. It was one result of a general process of ‘discovery’ of conflict: a nation that had prided itself as having been born in the Boer and the First World conflicts had ‘officially’ discovered that there had been conflict before:

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<sup>49</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Melbourne, 1987).

<sup>50</sup> See also H. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, cit. pp. 198-202.

<sup>51</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, cit. p. 110.

[t]he European death toll of almost 2000 was four times the number of fatal Australian casualties in the Boer and Vietnam wars and seven times the number of Australians killed in the Korean war. The Aboriginal death toll was ten times the Maori losses in the much-vaunted New Zealand wars. These figures make a mockery of the long-cherished belief that European settlement in Australia was peaceful.<sup>53</sup>

It had been a war, albeit of a particular kind, and, as Henry Reynolds had already argued for in *The Other Side of the Frontier*, this conflict could be officially acknowledged and commemorated:

[t]he black-white warfare was sporadic, barbaric and guerrilla in style. It was also largely an unofficial war, although at times colonial administrators committed troops and police against the Aborigines, declared martial law against them and gazetted them as open enemies. [...] Perhaps it is time for Australians of European descent to honour the Aboriginal dead in war memorials: they too fought for their land and culture.<sup>54</sup>

A move toward inclusion, both in history books and in the public domain was identified as a possible solution for the incorporation of frontier conflicts in Australia's military tradition. In this way, Aboriginal resistance would be marginally incorporated in the ANZAC tradition and "The Struggle for Australia" ultimately settled.

*A Most Valuable Acquisition*, part of the four volumes *The People's History of Australia since 1788*, approached the 1988 bicentenary in a far from celebratory way: "[a]t a time of national self-congratulation this book takes a long, hard look at what we are doing here and how we have exploited this continent. The picture that emerges does not sit easily

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<sup>52</sup> See G. Turner, *Making It National* (Sydney 1994), pp. 66-92.

<sup>53</sup> R. Broome, "The Struggle for Australia: Aboriginal-European Warfare, 1770-1930", in M. McKernan, M. Browne (eds.), *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Canberra, 1988), p. 119.

<sup>54</sup> R. Broome, "The Struggle for Australia", cit. p. 120. Ten years later, a similar contribution would go even further: the *Encyclopaedia of Australian Battles* included references to the engagements that took place between Aboriginal people and European or European-led forces. Over a number of 306 actions listed, around a sixth are made up of such engagements. See C. Coultard, *Where Australians Fought: The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles* (Sydney 1998).

with nationalist stereotypes”.<sup>55</sup> In explaining the reasons why ‘a people’s history’ was necessary, the authors comprehensively criticised a previous historiographical orthodoxy:

[I]n 1970, during the bicentenary of Captain Cook’s landing, Bruce Petty joked that Australia was re-enacting more history than it was making. Organizations large and small, from the federal parliament to the local primary school, have put money into producing histories to mark one birthday or another. These histories are a key part of the public celebrations that have reached a climax with the bicentenary of the British invasion of 1788 [...]. It is clear that a history which concerns itself with the actions of well-heeled, white, Anglo-Saxon males can only tell a small part of the story. Now its blank spots, its silences, are being punctured by new insistent voices. We have tried to bring some of these dissenting voices together here [...].<sup>56</sup>

Since the early 1970s, history had been written and rewritten to a considerable extent, yet, according to the editors of *The People’s History of Australia*, the extent of this transformation was still unsatisfactory. Stemming from the failure to recognise that the “Australian settler society was built on invasion and dispossession”, a ‘new history’ had emerged and paralleled more conventional understandings.<sup>57</sup> By then, the historiographical landscape had come to be divided along an interpretative gulf based on the notion of ‘guilt’ on the one hand and on a ‘celebratory’ disclaiming of responsibility on the other. Yet, despite the consolidation of an interpretative divide, both at the level of ‘official’ bicentenary narratives or at the level of ‘counter-celebrative’ critical histories, the notion of a bloodthirsty ‘land war’ fought over the whole of the continent had been established and slowly but surely incorporated into the received interpretation of the country’s history.

However, according to some scholars, deconstructing the mythology of the ‘Quiet Continent’ could not necessarily produce a satisfactory understanding of the dynamics of race relations. *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, for example, argued for a comprehensive reappraisal of the concept of ‘Aboriginality’ itself.<sup>58</sup> While history had until the late 1980s been prominent in this intellectual transformation, Jeremy Beckett was now

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<sup>55</sup> V. Burgmann, J. Lee (eds.), *A Most Valuable Acquisition* (Melbourne, 1988), p. ix.

<sup>56</sup> V. Burgmann, J. Lee (eds.), *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, cit. p. xii.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

questioning the capacity of traditional narratives to grasp the subtleties of the realities of race relations after the ‘frontier’ line had passed through Aboriginal districts. He proposed to shift the focus away from the analysis of military confrontation between Aboriginal and European forces and emphasised the need to assess the processes of cultural construction of identity. ‘Aboriginality’ was then postulated as an ideological construct shaped by the historical circumstances from which it progressively evolved. Historicising the very notion of Aboriginality, this work was highlighting a paradox Aboriginal people had to confront in their challenges to the *status quo*:

[t]he location of ‘the real Aborigines’ simultaneously in the remote past and the outback (see Rowley 1970), bring together time and space within a unitary concept. [...] Compared with, and at times comparing themselves with, the ‘real Aborigine’, Aboriginal people are caught between the attribution of unchanging essences (with the implication of an inability to change) and the reproach of inauthenticity.<sup>59</sup>

In his exploration of the ways in which European (and Aboriginal) people have constructed notions of ‘Aboriginality’, Beckett called for the adoption of a more acceptable definition, because “[e]ven in rural areas, local Aboriginal peoples have been ignored in favour of ‘the real Aborigines’, supposedly living a ‘tribal’ life ‘in the bush’”.<sup>60</sup>

Following this (re)interpretative trend, Marie Hansen Fels also called for a thorough reassessment of the interpretative categories to deal with Aboriginal history.<sup>61</sup> *Good Men and True* specifically addressed one of the most controversial issues in the interpretation of the history of white-Aboriginal relations: why had Aboriginal people participated in the Native Police Corps; why had they actively consented to such an effective and ruthless way to exterminate their fellow Aborigines? Fels challenged established explanations of demoralisation, despair and/or misinformation (or vengeance against traditional enemies -

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<sup>58</sup> J. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality* (Canberra, 1988).

<sup>59</sup> J. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present*, cit. p. 194.

<sup>60</sup> J. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present*, cit. p. 191.

<sup>61</sup> M. Fels, *Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District, 1837-1853* (Melbourne, 1988).

“perhaps itself a subtle manifestation of the stereotype of the savage at work”) and set out to describe a much more complicated pattern of motivations.<sup>62</sup>

In answering the question ‘Why would Aboriginal men want to join a police force of the foreigners who had taken over their land?’, the argument is put that joining the Corps was an attempt to share in the power and authority of the invader who was so clearly here to stay: it is argued, further, that the men of the Corps used the prestige and influence they derived from membership (and the material things they acquired) to extend their influence within traditional social relationships. It is very significant that all the headmen of the sections of the tribes who owned the country around Melbourne served with the force at some stage.<sup>63</sup>

While appraising an intercultural history, *Good Men and True* superseded simpler characterisations of racial conflict and represented the history of Aboriginal opposition to settler hegemony as irreducibly complicated by the interface between the two elements of the resistance/compliance equation. It was a new, albeit controversial, way to interpret Aboriginal ‘collaborationism’ (and success), yet it made a persuasive argument. As well as a history of ruthless participation in the destruction of Aboriginal society, Aboriginal participation in the Native Police was seen as a successful attempt to proactively shape the balances of power in the emerging colonial environment.<sup>64</sup> Similarly to McGrath, Fels work was also implying that what had happened locally (e.g.: Victoria) might have also happened in the other colonies where the Native Police had been deployed. ‘Participation’ and ‘collaboration’ with European institutions were now interpreted in a way that allowed the possibility of Indigenous manipulative agency.

Consistently, *The Making of the Aborigines*, published in 1989, also challenged the notions of ‘Aboriginality’ as pre-dating invasion.<sup>65</sup> Whereas

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<sup>62</sup> M. Fels, *Good Men and True*, cit. p. 260. See also L. E. Skinner, *Police of the Pastoral Frontier* (Brisbane, 1975), and T. Rowse, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions* (Melbourne, 1993) pp. 16-20.

<sup>63</sup> M. Fels, *Good Men and True*, cit. p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> See also J. Critchett, *A Distant Field of Murder: Western District Frontiers, 1834-1848* (Melbourne, 1990).

<sup>65</sup> B. Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines* (Sydney 1989).

other historians have taken 'Aborigines' as a given, I have seen Aborigines as an historical phenomenon which can only be understood in the context of colonization and of their relationships with Europeans. [...] Before the coming of the Europeans, one cannot regard 'Aborigines' as a homogenous group.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, Bain Attwood discerned the development of a common Aboriginal consciousness as a result of the interaction between Europeans and Aborigines and argued, with Beckett, that 'Aboriginality' itself was the outcome of a very specific historical process:

I think that the way the Aboriginal peoples came to be Aborigines - as an ethnic group in itself and for itself - should be the subject of inquiry. This means focusing not on their 'being' but on their 'becoming'. To look at their making one must examine the particular moments and ways in which Aborigines were formed; to transpose E. P. Thompson to another context, I believe we will not reach a proper understanding of the recent history of the Aboriginal peoples here until we see Aborigines as a social and cultural formation, an historical - and hence changing - category arising from processes which can only be studied as these evolve over a considerable period of time.<sup>67</sup>

Logically, Aboriginal resistance to European hegemony could not have begun before the 'making' of the Aboriginal people (similarly, according to Thompson's analysis, the political consciousness of the English working class could not predate a fully developed system of capitalist relations). The establishment of an Aboriginal identity was a process that had followed and not predated dispossession. Therefore, the *loci* of Aboriginal resistance were drastically relocated from one side of the frontier line to the other. In this way, Attwood was challenging images of a doomed resistance and proposing a more sophisticated notion of resistance against loss of autonomy.

Only at the end of the nineteenth century - and not before Attwood argued - "the level of tolerance in European society [had] declined further" and a new phase had begun,

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<sup>66</sup> B. Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, cit. p. 149.

<sup>67</sup> B. Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, cit. p. 149.

replacing the initial accommodation that had followed invasion.<sup>68</sup> Attwood's interpretation was challenging established ameliorative narratives, in which frontiers - violent and brutal settings *par excellence* - were gradually superseded by a slow but sure bettering of conditions. The order was inverted: the pastoral frontier was presented as an age of direct and more or less consensual relationships which would be followed by an age of enforced removal, 'assimilation', and, of course, renewed resistance. The turning point in Aboriginal-white relations was associated with a decline in the level of settler tolerance and with the parallel processes of closer settlement and national construction. The Australian national experience and Aboriginality were then shown in continuous tension and indispensable to each other. With *The Making of the Aborigines*, the Aboriginal question was placed for the first time at the very centre of the reflection on the national experience. Not only the 'fringe dwellers' of Australian historiography had been finally included in wider understandings of Australian history; their experience was now understood as a necessary prerequisite for the comprehension of national narratives.

Reynolds' *With the White People*, completed this reinterpretation. Based on the assumption that, apart from local circumstances, most of Australia had witnessed a similar set of experiences in different periods between the 1820s and the 1890s, it was dedicated to Aboriginal 'collaboration' with Europeans. Sooner or later, Aborigines 'came in' to pastoral properties; it was an accommodation that had often been a mutually satisfactory arrangement:

Aborigines could return to their own country, live off the land, camp with relatives from other stations - or, in the early days, with those who were still living traditionally out in the bush. [...] Because Aboriginal culture survived and people continued to live in their own country they never conceded that they had lost their land, and that viewpoint was not just wishful thinking. [...] Most sheep and cattle farmers remained all the while merely tenants on Crown land. Clearly the whites had to be suffered, conciliated, appeased, managed, but they were almost certainly less important in Aboriginal eyes than the European supposed.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> B. Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, cit. pp 118, 134.

<sup>69</sup> H. Reynolds, *With the White People* (Melbourne, 1990), pp. 214, 228.



Reynolds concluded that “[the black workers] were the pioneers”: it was a convincing interpretative summation, challenging “the still-popular view that pioneering was the exclusive achievement of Europeans and that the Aborigines contributed nothing to the successful colonisation of the continent”.<sup>70</sup> The “reluctance to embrace the black pioneers” was explained with “the pervasive influence of white racism and the enduring power of a national legend which suggests that the outback molded uniquely Australian values, attitudes and personality types”.<sup>71</sup> Denouncing modern versions of ‘The Australian Legend’ and its exclusionist character, *With the White People* was consistent with the rest of Reynolds’ writing: it was again a proposal towards the inclusion of the Aboriginal experience within the mainstream of Australia’s historiography.

Concluding *The Other Side of the Frontier*, he had proposed that Aboriginal ‘resistors’ be celebrated as part of the ANZAC tradition; now he was recommending the inclusion of black ‘collaborators’ within the most cherished pioneering tradition of Australia.<sup>72</sup> During the 1980s, one by one, the assessment of most of the ‘agents’ of destruction of Aboriginal society (the ‘violent’ frontier, the pastoral economy, and the native police) had been qualified and sometimes reversed.<sup>73</sup> Whereas collaborative practices were forgotten or dismissed by the historiographical revision of the 1970s they were reassessed and rehabilitated.

### c) Epilogue

During the 1970s and 1980s, images of frontier violence, meaningless brutality and total dispossession were taken on board as well as those of tribal and individual decision-making, resilience, successful resistance, accommodation and “voyaging”. As Stanner had prophetically noted in a 1958 article,

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<sup>70</sup> H. Reynolds, *With the White People*, cit. p. 231.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>72</sup> H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, cit. p. 201.

<sup>73</sup> See also N. Butlin, *Our Original Aggression: Aboriginal Populations of South East Australia, 1788-1850* (Sydney, 1983), which deals with the introduction of European diseases and their impact on Aboriginal communities and population.

[a] disintegration following on a voluntary and banded migration is a very different kind of problem from the kind we usually picture - that of the ruin of a helpless people, overwhelmed by circumstances, [...] They went because they wanted to, and stay because they want to. [...] Some of our general ideas may thus need drastic revision.<sup>74</sup>

During these decades, a ‘drastic revision’ was in many respects still in the making. Yet the, considerable amount of historical research carried out during these decades did succeeded in locating Aboriginal history in the wider context of Australian history. ‘Locating’ seems an appropriate term; because the process of historical redescription has also been a matter of a process of changing the mental geography of a historiographical orthodoxy (both Rowley and Stanner had acquired extensive experience in Australia’s colonial dependencies and had worked on Aboriginal history from outside Australia). In his *Australia Since Federation*, Emeritus Professor and frontier historian Frederick Alexander had condensed in a single page the description of the various administrative policies devised and enacted during seven decades to deal with the Aboriginal ‘problem’. What was significant in Alexander’s text is not the amount of synthesis - a common feature of historical narratives during this period - rather, it was its location: in the section dedicated to the colonial disengagement Australia had to perform in relation to its colonial possessions. The paragraph on the Aboriginal experience was interspersed between a mention of McMahon’s “five-year development programme aimed at ‘full internal self-government’ [of Papua New Guinea] by 1976” and a reference to the agreement “between the Commonwealth government and the people of the island of Nauru”.<sup>75</sup>

Not only Aboriginal history had been neglected in Alexander’s text; it had been placed outside the national borders and confined to an intellectual (and geographic) limbo. Disengaging from Nauru and Papua New Guinea would prove - for policy makers but also for historians - much easier than disentangling from the discomfoting nature of Aboriginal history. Yet, in this respect, these decades witnessed a true historiographical makeover,

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<sup>74</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, “Continuity and Change among the Aborigines”, *Australian Journal of Science*, XXI (1958-59), p. 102.

<sup>75</sup> F. Alexander, *Australia Since Federation: A Narrative and Critical Analysis* (Melbourne 1972), pp. 318-319.

firmly establishing Aboriginal history in Australian history, historiography and Academia, and 'repatriating' it - conceptually as well as metaphorically.