Find our heart
at
Myall Creek

'History despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.'

Maya Angelou
African American poet, writer, historian, civil rights activist

They might be gone but they are not forgotten. There's no more crying. There's no more tears, because they are free. Their spirits are free.

Myall Creek elder Aunty Sue Blacklock, June 2021

Myall Creek today is not only remembering history; it is making history.

Sydney Friends of Myall Creek, 2021

The path to our future passes through the past.

Sydney Friends of Myall Creek, 2003

There remains a scar on the face of the country, a birth-stain of injustice and exclusion directed against that people who could so easily provide the core of our sense of ourselves as a nation but who remain on the fringes …

Inga Clendinnen, Australian historian & author

As the Nazi environment enveloped us, its evils grew invisible because we were part of them. If I was ignorant, I ensured my own ignorance. If I did not see it was because I did not want to see.

Albert Speer, Nazi Minister for Armaments

Find Our Heart at Myall Creek

Graeme Cordiner

Dedicated to …

travelling companion, my wife Sallie

With thanks to …

Hilda, James, Malcolm, Joyce, Cheryl,

Peter, Matthew, Sue, Kelvin, Ivan

In memory of …

Bob Steele

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Introduction

Myall Creek, June 1998.

The sun is shining, the breeze is brisk and bracing in the mid-morning after a bitterly cold night. Hard to believe I am standing on this sacred spot, one hundred and fifty years to the day since the massacre. And harder to believe this place has any global significance.

Myall Creek is no metropolis!

No overdevelopment traffic jams here, no honking horns or jostling crowds, no real civilisation at all. Not even a pub. On the map it is marked as a locality which means no-one actually lives here. The corrugated tin hall, a memorial to the local fallen soldiers of the two World Wars, is all there is apart from the forlorn outside toilet and two cracked and, for a tennis player, sadly overgrown clay tennis courts.

I am with friends but wander off alone to register the moment. My feeling is somehow I have been ambushed and brought here. And breathing in the crisp air it certainly has that feel, if not of déjà vu then certainly of being connected to this place, that I am not trespassing.

In the near distance I can make out through the scattered eucalypts the Myall Creek Station homestead, all by itself, two-storey and imposing in a very Victorian sort of way. Myall Creek Station is after all still a cattle property. But otherwise it is hills, and trees, and fences. And more hills and trees and fences.

And the creek itself of course though, just now, more a series of waterholes than a flowing stream.

I stumble through long tufts of grass, finally looking over a fence to where I think probably the massacre of those twenty-eight innocents took place. And I picture

the events happening right before my eyes, the gang hell-bent on murder coming straight towards where I am now standing.

And I sense the fear, the terror, of the moment.

The breeze, passing softly across my face, suddenly drops. I turn towards the sun's embracing warmth. I notice a small bird – it is a willy wagtail, hopping from rock to rock. But otherwise it is so very still. Turning to join the others I notice dark rain clouds forming on the horizon.

And it is then that I hear them, their heart-rending cries. And then …

Silence.

* * * *

That silence called to me, pursued me, over the ensuing years. Try as I might to distract myself when I was least expecting it there I was, right back again at Myall Creek.

This silence was much more than an absence of noise. It was a silence that demanded attention, a crying out kind of silence that reminds me of Edward Munch's painting 'The Scream', a silence that beckoned a journey to be made.

No wonder I tried to avoid it for so long!

Even Aboriginal people have avoided it. Being more spiritually attuned they could not just pass by and not hear anyone calling out to them through the trees – unlike we who can so easily turn a deaf ear. So they kept away. In this strikingly beautiful valley Aboriginal people would never linger long. Come for a football match or some event, perhaps, but that was it.

All the more astonishing then that one year at the annual commemoration at Myall Creek a descendant of

the massacre, elder Aunty Sue Blacklock, affirmed what all there were feeling: 'There is such great peace in this place' – sentiments recorded in their hundreds in the visitors' book at the end of the new memorial walk.

At Myall Creek today there is no longer a silence of terror but of incredible power, enough to change hearts and recall us to where our feet first left the path.

This book traces that journey, the Aboriginal journey of one very white Australian.

We are such busy people. Step aside from the rat race and walk with me awhile on this road less travelled …

Graeme Cordiner
Sydney, 2022

Note:
This book contains names of people who have passed on.
Also the Aboriginal members of the Friends of Myall Creek committee prefer to be called Aboriginal people over First Nations or Indigenous.

Bury My Heart

at

Myall Creek

1

‘Don’t you *hate* those white men?’

My Myall Creek journey did not start in a vacuum. It started at Armidale, not far from Myall Creek. The setting is still so clear in my mind, sitting in the University of New England student union cafeteria at a table near the window, and fellow student Jo coming over, smiling, sitting down opposite.

A popular distraction in this university country town was hitchhiking from campus into the town’s one and only cinema. Not overly newsworthy to do that, but this time, after hellos, our conversation centred on a film it turned out we had both separately seen the week before.

Little Big Man appropriately starred Dustin Hoffman, whose long life (in the film that is) overlapped with the last years of the Native Americans’ resistance to the relentless westward White march across the United States. Not long before the final battle at Wounded Knee was the Sand Creek massacre depicted in the film.

In the movie Hoffman married a Native American. At the time of the Sand Creek massacre, she was pregnant. He escaped but she was shot, through the stomach.

Was it just that I was young that when that shot was fired, I really did physically feel it?

We both did.

I remember Jo then suddenly looking straight at me.

‘Don’t you *hate* those white men?’

Her question and her earnestness caught me completely off guard. I didn’t know what to say. Then after a lengthy pause, from somewhere I said:

‘No.’

Her look was of hurt disbelief. I immediately sat forward.

'No, no, Jo. I don't mean that.'

'So what *do* you mean?'

Indeed, what *did* I mean? Clumsily and hastily I tried to unscramble my thoughts.

'Jo, I too hate what they did. But how can I just hate those who did it when I cannot be absolutely sure – I mean, given the age and attitudes and brutality I guess they breathed and grew up with, and suffered from … I can't rule out, well, mightn't I have got caught up in it myself?'

'Oh.'

And in her eyes I registered a shaft of light breaking through an otherwise hopeless conclusion – if not about the film then certainly about me.

* * * *

That conversation proved pivotal. Soon afterwards, like Captain Cook I discovered Aboriginal people. There were Aboriginal communities not far from most towns in that part of the country, and my adopted university town, Armidale, was no different. Anyway, I therefore figured in an unguarded unselfish moment that I could nobly slot in hitch-hiking downtown once a week to tutor five or six primary school Aboriginal boys and girls.

One day we were invited to visit their homes. What I saw as home was a corrugated tin shelter on the side of a hill. It *was* home, and we were warmly welcomed, but it was no thanks to the buildings. Armidale can go well below freezing in winter. The streaming noses, the coughs, the bronchitis – no wonder.

Week after week as these children looked up at me with their expectant eyes, their wide smiles, I came

literally face to face with an Australian story so completely other and so much older than my own – a story I slowly began to recognise must change my own Australian story for ever.

But in a way I was ready for it.

Compared to Armidale the Sydney of my childhood was even then a big city, but for all that a very small world. At Sunday School (in those days definitely the done thing) Jesus had sparkling blue eyes and blond hair, whilst at school I learnt the British view of settlement, that though we lived down under in Australia with all those funny animals and weird trees, not to worry because we were all subjects of our Queen, the Queen of *England*. And more, as we were daily reminded by the map on the wall at school, fully one quarter of the world was coloured that ubiquitous colonial pink.

And how secretly proud we all were that it was so, that we were all part of this Empire upon which the sun never set!

No, I was a good white Anglo even if my surname is in fact Scottish with ancestral French connections (very probably smugglers). My mother's parents on the other hand, were Welsh and north England Geordie.

And my eyes are more grey-green than blue.

This very white childhood world began to falter for me by the late 1960s, the end of my high school, accelerated by the Vietnam War. At university I missed out on the conscription lottery, but not on the fallout. On the wall in my dorm room was a now famous poster of a young Vietnamese girl fleeing napalm bombing. She had burns all over, and in her face was such awful distress. Every day her face asked me 'Why?'

Never did get an answer.

It was around that time I started losing my hair.

So really, yes, I was ready.

I somehow graduated as a teacher (fortunately starting off well for thereafter my grades plotted a strikingly neat negative gradient) and returned to Sydney. And I discovered Aboriginal people there as well.

Even right in my own backyard.

My aunty by marriage literally lived with her family in our backyard for a time and thereafter we saw her most weekends until she died prematurely of cancer. We were blind to her Aboriginality, obvious though it is to me now – her dark skin and brown eyes. But then so was she blind. Neither she nor my uncle seemed to see any Aboriginal people either, even if she met one in the bathroom mirror every morning of her life.

Then I met Ben, half Crow Native American, half Aboriginal, his father having jumped ship. I often visited him and wife Sarah at their mission settlement on Botany Bay where he was pastor, the suburb name La Perouse a reminder of past empires and how close a thing it was.

As a first year out teacher, I also invited an Aboriginal dance group to my school. In the mid-1970s this was pioneering. It was winter and the dancers, traditional people from Arnhem Land, wanted to build a fire in the classroom. Innovative, I thought, but the Principal declined. Instead they demonstrated throwing boomerangs across a six-lane highway. Fortunately they came back.

Well, most of them.

After three years immersion in this Aboriginal world, I went to teach in Japan and then Africa and lost touch. Just before taking up a post in Zimbabwe in 1981 I did however manage an extended journey to our deep north, through Alice Springs and on out to Uluru (Ayers Rock then), and a stone's throw thousand kilometres or so up

to Darwin. And then thousands more kilometres back across the Barkly Tableland (with not a tree to be seen and only one road-stop) into Queensland.

I listened. I heard stories, black and white and 'kanak' (Pacific Islanders shanghaied to work as slave labour in the cane fields). Story after story after story. I finished that trip in an Aboriginal co-operative in southern Queensland. Talking to the secretaries, telling them of where I had been, what I had seen and heard of so many massacres, on the spur of the moment I said that word, 'sorry'.

It wasn't planned; it just slipped out: 'Sorry'.

The looks on their faces! Imagine, that anyone white would even dare consider saying sorry for what had happened.

Sallie and I were married during my time in Zimbabwe. Held in Sydney, Pastor Ben and Mrs Cruse came to our wedding. It was such a great honour. No longer young, they had travelled by public transport way out of their comfort zone from the south of Sydney across the Harbour Bridge to up-market Mosman. He was called on to give an impromptu blessing. Which he did. So even my marriage had an Aboriginal presence.

A decade later, back to live again in Sydney, I regularly took overseas students to meet inner city Aboriginal people. I challenge anyone to forget an Aboriginal dance group giving an impromptu performance, with Japanese students spontaneously responding in song.

I had by then yet again lost touch with Ben, but one day dropped in unannounced. Ben had died from bone cancer. All the time I knew him he seemed to feel he had failed in some way, but Mrs Cruse told me over a thousand people came for his funeral. I said I felt so sad that I had missed him. She asked me just that.

'Why haven't you been to visit?'

I had no answer. I didn't understand then how loved I was by them. Yet I am now persuaded in this world where everything is passing away (me too), love never dies, and in that other place we will meet again.

And then, too, I have read books.

And now as I write I am startlingly reminded that even as a young child, long before meeting those Aboriginal children in Armidale, I had met an Aboriginal family – in a child's picture book. This was the tale of Rikili. I am surprised I can still remember her name. A young tribal Aboriginal girl lost in the bush, she was found after a long search by her father. What *joy* there was at finding her. I read and re-read that book, lying on the floor in the hall at home, fascinated by the many photos still so clear in my mind – Rikili's bright, wonderful smile, and her proud father standing straight and tall with initiation markings on his chest.

They became friends. They really did. And I have forgotten them too. And suddenly as I write tears are in my eyes (am I losing it?)

Later there were other books. One by Henry Reynolds is even now staring boldly out at me demanding an answer: *'Why Weren't We Told?'*

Then I met Myall Creek, read about it, was drawn to it, noticed when articles crossed my desk. Then out of the blue Jane, a seldom contacted friend, sent me notice of a meeting up at Myall Creek.

And so here I am, in startled wonder at this way-out-of-my-comfort-zone journey that I never planned.

2

Myall Creek, 1998

The meeting at Myall Creek was yesterday and I am now on the bus back home. And watching the wintry wind and rain outside, I have to remind myself I have actually been to Myall Creek.

The bus is taking me to my train connection. The train part is great. As for the bus, let's just say the seats are cosy and with no eats or drinks allowed, great for losing weight, so I am using the time to get on paper an extraordinary conversation I just had at breakfast.

Home for the past two nights has been a pub in the nearest big town to Myall Creek, Inverell. The big plus of country hotels over motels is the breakfast. Eggs, bacon plus a pot of tea, all for the asking. Well, I was about to begin eating when suddenly I was interrupted. Someone was saying hello. I turned around and realised she was talking to me! I am not used to this. I mean, I live in Sydney.

'From around here?'

'Sydney,' I managed to reply. 'What about you?'

'I live on a property out of town. Had some farming business to do. So what brought you all the way up here?"

'Came up for a meeting yesterday out at Myall Creek, about setting up a memorial.'

'Myall Creek?'

'Where the massacre happened, in 1838.' I was surprised at her surprise for I thought it was well-known.

'Not far from here,' I continued.

'That's just so interesting,' her face suddenly becoming alive. 'You see my husband's family has farmed in this area for generations. One day he told me a place on our farm had bad vibes, and that he tried to avoid it. Unusual for him to say that – he's normally such a down-to-earth type. Well, it troubled me, and I mentioned it to some friends. One told me just a few days ago there had indeed been a massacre on our land. I told my husband but he just brushed it off.

'But I can't. I need to know more.'

So I told her the story of Myall Creek. Well, the story that I knew.

'It was half past three on a Sunday afternoon, June 10th 1838. Old people, women, children, had their hands tied, palms together like this,' I demonstrated as I spoke, 'and then were tied to a long rope. They were then dragged by a man on a horse to a clearing in the bush.'

'Children too?' she said with a look of disbelief.

'Even toddlers and babies, I'm afraid, clinging to their mothers.'

Silence.

'That's just so awful.'

Again silence. And I wondered if she had young children herself. As I have. And through her I felt the pain of it all afresh. I told her they were all murdered, but spared her how.

'Worst for me was the stockman, Charles Kilmeister. He was the one who'd invited them onto the sheep station in the first place. Kilmeister played with the children.'

'*Played* with them? But then how …? How did you find all this out?'

'Others at Myall Creek told me, but it's all in the trial records in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. As far as I can

tell it was the only massacre ever brought to justice. That's why – unlike the massacre on your farm – the story was told.'

'I never knew … I interrupted you. What else do you know?'

'Well, the station had only been set up about a year earlier. The overseer, William Hobbs, had three convict workers – the two stockmen, Kilmeister and Andrew Burrowes, and the hutkeeper George Anderson. Plus two Aboriginal brothers, Davey and Billy. They were from a different tribe. Because they worked for the squatter landowner Henry Dangar, they weren't in any danger.'

'Name's familiar.'

'Dangar? You recognise it?'

'There's a Dangar Street in Armidale. And Dangar Falls.'

'Same one. There's even a Dangar Island near Sydney.'

'Sorry. Go on.'

'Well, it seems all of them became quite friendly with the group. Some were given nicknames.'

'Amazing. You even know their names?'

'Only some. One small boy was called Charley, very likely after Kilmeister. He was playful and precocious. Everyone liked him. Anyway, when the gang suddenly turned up …'

'What gang?'

'A squatter's son and eleven convicts and ex-convicts. They asked first Kilmeister, and then Anderson, to join them.'

'They knew them?'

'Kilmeister did. Some of them. The gang almost certainly knew that the overseer Hobbs was away cutting bark on a nearby station, along with the convict

Burrowes and ten of the younger Aboriginal men. The overseer there told them to get straight back to Myall Creek. He had met the gang the day before and was alarmed at what they might be up to.'

'Oh no. But of course, they were too late.'

'Several hours too late. The hutkeeper Anderson, who'd refused to join in, later remembered one father breaking down when he saw his young daughter who Anderson had kept hidden.'

'How very brave of him.'

'Yes,' I replied as I reached for the teapot. But it was empty and with a start I realised my bus would soon be leaving. I grabbed my bag and hastily excused myself.

'Before you go, tell me. Little Charley … he was killed too, wasn't he?'

'Yes … yes, most likely he was.'

But then her saddened face suddenly lit up with a smile.

'Well, really hope it all goes well. The memorial.'

'Yeah, thanks. Thanks a lot.'

For a cold Sydneysider, a warm welcome to country.

I did not have time to finish the story. Maybe for her sake just as well, for the story did not end there.

There were several initial survivors: two boys who had hidden in the creek when the gang rode in, the girl Anderson hid under his bed, two women Anderson and Davey saved, and the woman taken by the gang for their abuse before being released.

When the younger Aboriginal men came back with Hobbs and Burrowes later that night, at Anderson's urging they all fled, fearful the gang, out somewhere celebrating, would soon return. And they did return. And, yes, it seems caught up with and murdered most of

them also. What we do know is that the two boys at least survived.

But what she said was right – what courage the hutkeeper Anderson had to say no. Yet he was helpless, powerless to stop this nightmare unfolding right across the country.

But wait, you will want to know – what happened at yesterday's meeting out at Myall Creek …

Well, this year of 1998 has been such a long dry spell, but yesterday it bucketed down. It set an atmosphere, Aboriginal and other locals and the rest of us in that tin community hall, shoulder to shoulder as we were, all falling silent under the drumming of the rain. Uncle Lyall Munro, the Myall Creek elder leading the meeting, told us later the hairs on the back of his neck had stood on end because the raindrops were tears, tears so long held in, released at last by those who had lost their lives and their loved ones in 1838, one hundred and fifty years ago to the day.

He was shaken by it. It was so real to him.

The main talk was of setting up a memorial. A cairn was suggested, a pile of rocks, but someone was adamant.

'Nothing second rate!'

He was a big bloke with a big voice so we unanimously agreed. And then what else could we do but form a committee – half Aboriginal, half non-Aboriginal, to erect a memorial, a proper fair dinkum memorial up on the hill, overlooking the Myall Creek massacre site.

2000

The Memorial

3

Moree

'How was the trip?'

'A long day, but not bad.'

'You mean good?'

'Well, let's not get carried away.'

This is such an important year. The Myall Creek Memorial Walk we talked about back in '98 will be officially opened tomorrow.

I am in Moree, an Aboriginal name meaning 'rising sun'. This is not my first visit, so I know something of the Aboriginal presence here, but this time I want to go deeper. Moree is not the most direct route to Myall Creek from Sydney, is in fact a fair bit further west, but apart from catching up with old friends John and Ruth, another plus is the train goes *all* the way.

'At one stage two Aboriginal children sat across the aisle from me – a boy and girl, laughing and talking to each other. Brother and sister perhaps.'

'But that's not uncommon up here.'

'Yes, but I couldn't help thinking – I mean, I have actually been to Myall Creek, to the place where Aboriginal children *just like them* were massacred by white men *just like me,* really not that very long ago.'

'Oh.' Clearly I had caught Ruth off guard. Then, after a pause she said:

'Do you really think like that?'

'The children weren't on the train that long,' I continue. 'Should've said hello.'

'So you had a silent trip.'

'Not entirely. I did speak to a bloke who looked country.'

'You did?' she said in mocked surprise.

'Yeah, but only towards the end of the trip.'

Ruth smiles and tops up my tea as I recount our conversation. After 'where ya goin?' this bloke pointed to a man a few seats up, telling me he was a stockman just like him. 'A good one,' he went on. 'He's a good bloke too. It's just that he can't handle alcohol.' 'Really?' I replied. He was lying passed out across two seats. With 'I'll take care of him,' he concluded our conversation.

'Well, Ruth, sure enough next stop they stumbled off the train. I even managed a wave.'

Ruth smiles again and then suddenly excuses herself for a phone call.

But it gets me thinking. My father for a time was unable to resist the drink and if that stockman originally drank to blot out some buried pain, as my father had done, I reckon he was only one in a long line that traces right back to day one of European presence in Sydney. Sydney then was a giant gaol – small wonder they drank!

The train route up here yesterday in fact follows exactly the northward path of land expansion of the early colony along the well-watered coast up to Newcastle, now an industrial city at the mouth of the Hunter Valley. Turning west up this broad fertile valley, the train goes right up to the mountains at the back, which is where all valleys end up along this east coast, usually hitting impassable sandstone cliffs. But not this time. There is a way over, still requiring a climb and an additional engine it is true, but very passable for all that, whether by train or car – or in 1838 by horse or bullock dray.

Once before, travelling this way by car I had come across a brass plaque in one of the Hunter Valley

townships. Dated in the 1830s, it read 'End of Settlement'. West over the mountains rather than a breath of fresh air was the uncivilised unknown.

Ruth is clearly on a long call and my thoughts move on, drifting to the United States. What I saw in *Little Big Man* was just that, how the 'Wild West' was won. Or was it lost? Oglala Sioux mystic Black Elk, looking back upon the massacre at Wounded Knee from the high hill of his old age, said what he saw was not only the dead, but the death of a people's dream.

The hoop, the circle of life, had been broken.

That Native American story I read in 'Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee' by Dee Brown. And indeed when I read that book I felt my own heart had been buried.

But Myall Creek reminds me I am Australian, not American, though its parallels with Wounded Knee are compelling. If other killings could be somehow justified as retaliations for killing stock or a settler, as at Wounded Knee, Myall Creek certainly could not. And again like at Wounded Knee, they included the elderly, women, children, even babies.

The latest 'official' Australian massacre I have come across is the 1928 Coniston massacre in the Northern Territory. It was official because it was carried out by police. But it is the much earlier Myall Creek massacre that for me represents our untold massacre story.

Not because it was large. Just nearby Myall Creek, and not long before, was a far larger massacre at Waterloo Creek on the scale of Wounded Knee, carried out (yet again as at Wounded Knee) by a military expedition. Sanctioned by somehow suitably named acting Governor Snodgrass, it was led by a Major James Winniet Nunn. Nunn bragged later about his great military victories and in his pomposity named the site 'Waterloo' after the

famous battle in 1815 under the Duke of Wellington. For Nunn it was part of a fifty-three-day campaign of killing, to this day marked for posterity by obscure yet truthful place names like 'Slaughterhouse Creek'.

No, Myall Creek is not significant for numbers killed. It is significant because in the midst of such a great evil it was the first – and last – time we refused to be silent.

Ruth finally comes back in and over muffins and yet more tea I recount my thoughts to her – the alcohol, the bronze plaque, the Wild West, Wounded Knee, Snodgrass, the lot. She sits quietly, and I wait expectantly for her reply. Silence, and then:

'Do you really think like that?'

'Sorry I'm late,' John says, walking into the kitchen. 'Side mirror's been ripped off the car,' he adds calmly, as if asking for more toast. With my arrival he says he forgot to park round the backyard as he usually does, since something just like this is on the cards to happen.

'Most likely young Aboriginal kids.'

Ruth works in Aboriginal health, and maybe sparked by this, tells me she is discouraged in her work, and does not see much light at the end of the tunnel. About to offer advice I remember a Northern Territory farmer's admonition: 'The last thing we need up here is a bunch of do-gooders from down south telling us what we should do'.

OK. So, I listen.

One of the issues she says is black politics.

'They may all look the same to us, but in fact they come from different tribes and clans, and don't always get on.'

I tell her what the Northern Territory farmer had said. She likes that, and with a smile pours me another cup

(where would we be without our cup of tea?) Just then John calls out.

'Ready to go?'

'Sure. Where first?'

'Swimming.'

'You boys have a good day,' Ruth calls out as we drive off to check out Moree.

Yes it is June and the middle of winter, and c-o-l-d, but these pools are heated. Naturally, by hot mineral springs. Different pools have different temperatures and, tourist or is it adult child that I am, I try them all. In the larger cooler outside pool are Aboriginal kids having a great time doing dives.

But it wasn't always this way.

Moree pool history has been very colourful in a black and white sort of way. Though apartheid was never official policy it nevertheless operated in various ways in Australia right up at least into the late '60s (was in fact part of the 'inspiration' for apartheid in South Africa). This very pool was the site of a famous Freedom Bus Ride confrontation, when Aboriginal people and white university students from Sydney went bush to expose what was happening. In Moree it meant confronting the fact that Aboriginal people were not permitted to use the pool.

Whites only.

With the arrival of the Freedom Bus Aboriginal people at last had a voice in Moree and other country towns, and used it. And I think to myself it was not really all that long ago.

I mean, I was alive then.

We stay a couple of hours, alternating hotter and colder pools. I thank John.

'Glad you enjoyed it. People come from all over the world for the pools.'

'So what's next?

'Like to see where I work?'

'Lands Department? Sounds good.'

One of the untold success stories is surely how so many Aboriginal people made the post-massacre transition, only then to have their land taken from them. Stolen twice in other words.

John confirms that much remaining Aboriginal land on reserves was resumed for soldier-settler schemes. Even taken from Aboriginal ex-servicemen. They were soldiers too, yes, but were not eligible. Some even returned to find their children had been taken away.

I am finding all this hard to take in. Though classed as fit to die for their country, then to be classified as unfit to look after their own children. How did that happen? And having been through all that massacre history, to have still chosen to fight for country (or was it that the only place where they were treated as equals was in the army?) … and then to return home to *that*.

'I mean how would we feel if that had happened to us?' I say to John.

After lunch we drive around Moree, a fairly prosperous, largish town. Yet even this drive is revealing, and familiar. The Aboriginal suburbs were originally mission settlements, and are definitely different, poorer, not so unlike the black townships in Zimbabwe where I had taught.

'Different clans and tribes were all just put together,' John volunteers, confirming Ruth's not-getting-on-together breakfast conversation.

'You mean like locking up Aussies and Kiwis together,' I rejoinder

John laughs.

'Well anyway, it's been such a great day. Thanks a lot.'

'Sure. My pleasure.'

* * * *

The after-dinner TV news has the story of a local well-to-do white farmer who has started a scheme to help Aboriginal young people find work. Many employers apparently were onside but frustrated with the turnover. Through using mentors – white or black – the results have been startling. I find it very significant. It is like finding Ruth's lost light in her dark tunnel.

I turn in for an early night.

Tomorrow? Tomorrow I go to the very first Myall Creek Memorial commemoration ceremony. And in a gesture of supreme trust, I am getting there in John's prized '60s-something Holden car.

4

Bingara

Bingara, the nearest town to Myall Creek. This is an unplanned stop but after an hour driving John's precious if slightly mad machine – it has so much power in front you can hardly see the road – I am ready for a break.

I have anyway wanted to visit Bingara for back in the '60s Bingara local, Len Payne, wanted a massacre memorial using a symbolic gate with hinges and slip rails from the 1838 Myall Creek Station stockyards. The Apex club and newspaper had backed him but then he was attacked in a letter to the editor. His idea, it said, was an insult to the people of Bingara. That did it. The paper then refused to publish Len's reply, and the club withdrew support. Len never lost hope that one day a memorial would be built. He lived and breathed it, every June 10th laying a wreath at the site.

Well, Len may have since died, but not his vision. Here I am today going to the launch of the memorial he so much wanted – if not exactly his concept, a memorial nonetheless.

Nestled neatly beside a river, Bingara – yet another Aboriginal name, meaning 'shallow crossing' – has a well-cared-for feel with wide, wide streets and some stunning early settlement murals painted on available wall space. I wander up, then down, the main drag and drop into what may well be the one and only café for a huge vanilla milk-shake. It is right out of the '50s – the café and the milkshake.

I look around town, and stumble on an as-was refurbished Roxy theatre which doubles as an information centre. I check it out for anything on Myall Creek. And for whatever contrary happened in the past with Len, here today I see material on the memorial and the massacre displayed.

Bingara has a lot of attractions, gold panning nearby for one. Also they have an orange festival. How innovative! All country towns have memorials to soldiers who served and died. Bingara too, but theirs is a living memorial with orange trees as their remembrance, and no-one is allowed to touch the ripening oranges until the children say so. Then it is a free-for-all, literally.

Such a great idea, a living memorial with children in charge. Bingara, home of sunshine and oranges.

'Thanks so much,' I say to the woman on duty as I leave.

'My pleasure.'

What is it about country people?

And I wonder, as I get back in John's car, if reluctance by some of the locals to owning this massacre history is linked to feeling lumped with all the guilt, at times tangible, experienced still in the sudden defensiveness when raising the subject. Yet what happened at Myall Creek was driven from Sydney.

Sydney – isn't that where I come from?

I have a twenty-minute drive to Myall Creek, and yes, even if I don't have any oranges (the harvest has a few months to go), the sun is shining in a blue, blue sky. Reluctant to give up my musings, I begin to imagine the orange festival in Bingara, but this time also remembering the Aboriginal fallen out at Myall Creek, that in remembering the one you would, of course, remember the other.

'Dream on. It will never happen.'

That negative voice again! And in that moment of self-doubt, I do question why on earth I am doing this trip so far from home. But wait a minute! Didn't Len do exactly that, dream on – and in his case hasn't his dream happened?

So I picture Aboriginal and white children, with such joy and expectant excitement on their faces, running down the road to pick their oranges, done on this backdrop of shared remembrance of their fallen ancestors.

After exactly twenty minutes I cross the Myall Creek Bridge. On the flat next to the creek is that familiar corrugated tin Memorial Hall, memorial for the soldiers from this small Myall Creek community who fought in Australia's wars overseas. As I pull up a few turn to look at John's car – as you would expect.

Sitting in the car, in that stolen minute I decide to remember my own uncle Billy, killed just a month before war's end, and his then-pregnant wife's memory nearly sixty years later of 'that awful day'.

What a waste war is.

And suddenly I see another connection. Each year we now walk from this memorial to fallen soldiers, to the massacre memorial up on the hill opposite.

So?

So why not take a minute to acknowledge those fallen whose names are on the wall of the Myall Creek hall, fathers and grandfathers and uncles of the locals who help us out with lunch? A moment's silence for them to send us on our way up the hill.

The two memorials are not that far apart, after all, historically and physically, only a stone's throw separating them.

With lives sacrificed, I suspect, on the very same altar.

5

Memorial walk

With hurried hellos and farmer handshakes I fall in with others walking up the road, caressing my crushed fingers. There is such a wonderful sense of solidarity.

Earlier this year in similar solidarity some half a million of us shuffled across a jam-packed Sydney Harbour Bridge. And then suddenly hands pointed upwards and there it was, emblazoned across the sky: 'Sorry'.

Oh, the look on Aboriginal faces – that they would ever live to see such a day.

Well today at Myall Creek we are not so many, maybe half a thousand, but who is counting. Out here in the bush, it feels no less significant. There is no 'sorry' written in the sky, but the looks on the faces …

They are just the same.

As we come up the hill I am conscious of my heart beating (must be the excitement). There is no breeze yet the fire for the smoking ceremony gets lit with a cigarette lighter (what was I expecting?) Green gum leaves are piled on top and as we walk through the white eucalyptus-scented smoke it wafts over us, a symbol of cleansing. I am not sure in Aboriginal culture exactly of what. Perhaps of all negativity.

And if so, I wish it were that easy.

We enter the memorial walk in groups of twenty or so. Waiting for us at the first of the shiny bronze plaques which tell the story of 1838 are two high school students, side by side, one Aboriginal, one white, dressed smartly in their school uniforms. One reads out part of the message, and the other completes it.

Giirr ngurrambaa, walaaybaa nhalay Wirrayaraaygu Gamilaraaygu.

'From time immemorial, the Wirrayaraay tribe of the Gamilaraay lived here, caring for the land and harvesting the animals, fish, root crops, grains and fruits in a seasonal cycle. The identity of the Wirrayaraay derived from their spiritual relationship with the land.'

The text we are told is local Gamilaraay language, expanded in English. I notice the plaque has a striking etching and the person next to me, noticing my noticing, tells me they are by Aboriginal artist Colin Isaacs.

We move on along a path of compacted reddish gravel. My guess is it represents shed blood. The grass near the path has been recently mowed. It is a striking setting up on the top of this big, broad hill, some trees with dark almost black trunks set off by their silver grey-green leaves, amid the long spindly light brown grass. There are also ants, big black ones. I with most others skirt around them, and those that don't soon do.

At the next plaque conversation ceases as the two students, black then white, suddenly speak up:

Yilambu Wandagu dhaay dhimba milambaraay gaanhi.

'In the 1830s European squatters began to send their servants into the district to establish cattle and sheep stations, occupying the land and using its grass and water resources to feed their stock.'

The track wends its winding way around the trees, representing I believe a serpent from Aboriginal Dreaming. Everything has symbolism and I wish I were more aware. It is about twenty metres between plaques, and we pause to allow the group ahead to move on.

Yilaa Mari Wanda bumalalanhi; balunhi

burrulaa Mari gulbirr Wanda.

'Conflict soon arose as the Europeans forced the Wirrayaraay off their ancestral lands, drove them away from creeks and waterholes and seized Aboriginal women. The Wirrayaraay retaliated by spearing stock and attacking the stations and their personnel. Revenge killings began.'

The Aboriginal students do not give much away. What must it mean for them, to have their story acknowledged like this? Maybe they can't take it all in now. Maybe it will come later when they tell their family and friends, or maybe much later when they tell their own kids about that day at Myall Creek.

The white students seem aware, in the way they read, with respect – exactly what wasn't shown in 1838.

And as I move off I feel as if I am literally walking through the story.

Burrulaa Mari gandjibalu, bawurragu bumaay.

'Towards the end of 1837 parties of European stockmen and station hands, encouraged by a punitive expedition of Mounted Police sent from Sydney, embarked on a bloody rampage throughout the region, hunting down and killing any Aboriginal people they could find. Hundreds of Aboriginal people were slain.'

'Sent from Sydney.' So that means what had been sanctioned by government using Mounted Police, was only months later at Myall Creek brought to justice by the same government! No surprise then the men who were eventually hung could claim they hadn't realised hunting Aboriginal people was a crime.

Given this, the story we are about to be told has a strong sense of inevitability.

Wirray bumalalanhi gulbirr Mari Wanda;
ganunga maliyaa ginyi.

'In May 1838 a band of Wirrayaraay people took refuge from this onslaught on Myall Creek station below, at the invitation of one of the station hands. For the next few weeks they lived in peace around the station huts, and convivial relations were developed between them and the four-man staff.'

Standing under some trees, I imagine the scene just read, prompted by the Aboriginal people beside me today, their young children playing hide and seek. Everyone pauses after each plaque, and in those few moments I wonder again what they are thinking. How much in our lives is decided in those few moments, certainly the case at this very spot in 1838.

All the while the plaques are preparing us for what is to come, even if we already know the outcome, even if we are wanting the story to be different. The students again break my reverie:

jun 1838-ya burrulaa Wirrayaraay yinarr, gaay, wayama balunhi; giir bilaarrdhalibaa nhama mari.

'On 10 June 1838, a gang of stockmen led by a squatter rode into Myall Creek Station and brutally murdered about twenty-eight unarmed women, children and old men. The younger Wirrayaraay men were away cutting bark on a neighbouring station.'

Well, there it starkly is. I try to imagine those killed, waiting their turn. Brutal is the word. And then what it was like for those who watched on helpless to stop it – Anderson, and the two Aboriginal workers, Billy and Davey. Not unlike us today who are listening in, powerless to intervene. We arrive at the next plaque.

Nhama gagil Wanda gaabamandu bumaay.
Yilaa Wandagu burrulaa Mari bumaldanhi.

'Eleven of the twelve men who carried out the massacre were

arrested, tried and acquitted. In a second trial seven of them were found guilty and executed. The squatter involved was never brought to trial. This was the first time that white men had been executed for murdering Aboriginal people. However this did not end the massacres. They continued throughout the continent, often unreported, until the 1920s.'

Beyond the words there is a power in this place. We walk on in silence to the last plaque.

Ngiyani winangay ganunga.

'In memory of the Wirrayaraay people who were murdered on the slopes of this ridge in an unprovoked but premeditated act in the late afternoon of 10 June, 1838.'

I notice someone has tried to erase 'murdered' but failed, the attempt only making it more stark. The convicts had tried to do that too, erase their murder by burning the bodies, but they also failed, thwarted by the wet wood. And I am surprised, not that this defacing has been tried, but that the memorial has been left so untouched.

At the end of the path is a small clearing among some thicker bush, and there elevated before us on a small rise is a large granite rock standing sentinel over the massacre site below. On it are the words:

'Erected on 10 June 2000 by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in an act of reconciliation, and in acknowledgement of the truth of our shared history. We remember them.'

* * * *

I am on the train home, in fact not far now from Sydney.

What about the rest of the meeting yesterday, after the memorial walk?

Two clear memories …

First is of young Inverell Aboriginal dancers. This was the very first time dances have been performed in this place since 1838. Historic! Their leader told us later he initiated this dancing program as a way of re-introducing young people to culture.

The second is of an Aboriginal pastor. Only a few metres from me and clearly affected by the day, he just cried out: 'And the blood went into the ground and cried out for justice, and it still cries out for justice!'

I figured he must have been referring to the story of Cain killing his brother Abel and the blood going into the ground, and yet when confronted by God, Cain could only say, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Cain's life was spared by God, but from then on he was a marked man, a restless wanderer on earth.

Not a bad fit I think. I mean aren't we Aussies exactly that, restless and relentless world wanderers?

Might it be because of the blood still in the ground?

Oh, and in case you are from that era and are wondering about John's car, the drive back afterwards to Moree was heaven. I celebrated by stopping and buying an ice-cream called just that. 'Heaven' cost an exorbitant three dollars twenty, but who is counting the cost.

Life's short. Sometimes you just have to break out.

6

The hug

This morning my wife came in and apropos of nothing gave me a big hug – Sallie hardly ever does that!

It is a few weeks since the commemoration and with the shock of her unsolicited hug, the penny drops. Having finished that memorial walk, at the large rock suddenly four people came forward. We were told that before us were the descendants of 1838, not only Aboriginal descendants Aunty Sue Blacklock and Uncle Lyall Munro, but also Beulah Adams and Des Blake, descendants of those in the gang.

Incredible. Incredible they would show up. Then Des and Beulah together said:

'We are descendants of, and represent, all those who carried out murder and mayhem on the slopes below.'

And Aunty Sue and Uncle Lyall responded:

'We are descendants of those who survived.'

Then, unscripted, Aunty Sue and Uncle Lyall hugged Beulah and Des. I recall looking up through the trees and it seemed time itself had been suspended. We all wanted to remain. And I remember feeling that standing there with us were indeed those from 1838, as if all had waited so long for this day.

And suddenly it was over.

Our time and space world re-asserted itself and as if in an anti-climax we moved away. And as I walked slowly down the hill and across the creek which witnessed all these events, back to the corrugated tin hall, and lunch (I am human after all), I remember struggling to make meaning out of what had just happened.

And now with Sallie's hug, it has finally come to me.

When I hear news of home invasions, I shudder. Surely the worst crime is not done in a public place, but in the one place I feel safe, my own home. But what if those home invaders not only stole, but raped and even murdered as occasionally has indeed happened here in Sydney.

But not only that. What if then those home invaders took over my home as their own. And the police came and said they were one hundred percent right, and that I was trespassing … well, isn't all that the Aboriginal experience?

So in the hugs that day what did I witness?

After all that history, another chance.

Aunty Sue's and Uncle Lyall's warm embrace of Beulah and Des, and symbolically of all non-Aboriginal Australians, re-connects me to this place I call home. Their embrace I am sure we all have been hungering for at some deep level, even as we denied it, wrote it out of our history books, even as we were so profoundly and totally rejecting of the only people who could give us that welcome-to-country hug we so badly need.

So today we have another chance.

But at what cost?

In so many Aboriginal faces the lines of suffering, in face after face after face, tell me that that freely given hug is not without cost. What did that banner I saw in the Sydney Bridge march say?

'60,000 years of dreaming, 200 years of nightmares.'

So then how completely astonishing their offer of embrace. And all we have to do is to receive it, accept it, and embrace it in return.

Why do we find that so hard?

Why *do* we resist? Why?

2005

The day the sky fell down

7

The day the sky fell down

Having so long neglected this book (it feels like neglect) I only now sit down to write up my Myall Creek story since 2000, prompted by an unlikely talk with my neighbour. He was cleaning out his gutters when I walked by. What else could I do?

I said hello.

Being September we recalled that other September when the sky fell down on New York. I told him my brother Len had been flying out of New York that day and, shaken, later spoke of how near a thing it was.

I then mentioned a book on European settlement impact on Sydney Aboriginal people, how in imagining the collapse of all they had known, the author Keith Wiley had titled his book *When the Sky Fell Down*.

'Well, that was New York all right,' my neighbour said.

He then reminded me he had just lost his job in 2001, but he'd had a payout and enjoyed the break. What initially seemed a disaster had turned out for good.

Farewelling my neighbour, I marvelled his disaster year had given him the opportunity to step outside his own particular rut. So here I am, doing the same, writing the next chapter of when and why the sky fell down on twenty-eight unsuspecting and totally innocent people at Myall Creek, and wondering what the connection is to New York – and to me.

But it would be unfair just to leave you in the dark about my years of writing absence. My own sky-falling-down was not a job loss but burn-out, sudden in onset,

lasting in effect. Even if the sun was shining outside it could be winter inside.

The upside is I have been forced to look beneath the surface. Myall Creek also has that ability, forcing me to face up to so many personal, not to mention Australian, issues. And that I guess is why some are ready for Myall Creek – and some are not.

When the sky fell down on New York an American friend, living in Sydney, did what President George Bush failed to do. He asked – *why*. Robert and I met once a week for lunch. We did that for six months while I was still recovering from my own ground zero. Over noodles and green tea he made his connections and I made mine.

I told him about meeting my neighbor and our September 11 conversation, and also how the sky fell down on those unsuspecting Aboriginal people in 1838.

'And on you too.'

'And on you too,' I replied, somewhat defensively.

'You mean the Twin Towers?'

'Yes, set up by events long before.'

'How so?'

So I told him about the film *Little Big Man* and the destruction, as Black Elk saw it, of a people's dream.

'Your American Dream has had a fatal flaw. It was built on the destruction of others' dreams.'

Robert looked a bit taken aback at this, so immediately I added, 'Not pointing fingers at you. We all do it, living a kind of nursery school version of our history. We all like telling ourselves how good we are and have always been. Have you heard of Inga Clendinnen?'

'No.'

'She said that.'

'Still don't get it.'

'Well our own nursery story has been we are the land of the great fair-go. Not without basis. Women got the vote here well before you guys,' I added with a smile.

'Maybe, but then when did your Aboriginal people get the vote?'

'But that is my point. We told ourselves we were the land of equality, which of itself is a good thing, but that was only hiding the fact that for many it was anything but. It's called denial.'

It was all getting a bit deep and our green tea was cold, so we left it at that for the day.

The following week however I came with a quote I'd dug up by Robert Speer, the Nazi Minister for Armaments. I shared it with appropriate emphasis.

'As the Nazi environment enveloped us, its evils grew invisible *because we were part of them*. If I was ignorant, *I ensured my own ignorance*. If I did not see it was *because I did not want to see*.'

'You've really got into this, haven't you?'

'Maybe it's because of my own ground zero. We usually only front up and make connections when the wheels fall off.'

'And sometimes not even then,' he added.

This discussion was not without its lighter interlude. A rather striking woman looked in our direction and I said she was looking at me. Robert replied he'd had the same thought – that the she was looking at *him*. Before getting into who was denying reality, we then realised she was most likely looking at the shop sale behind us.

'So what are you saying – that all this led to September 11?' Robert said, getting us back on track.

'It's called joining the dots,' I replied with a smile. 'Someone should write a book, *Nursery History for Dummies*.'

'For people like me you mean.'

And we both laughed out loud.

This started us on a journey over ensuing weeks through the Middle East, the *why* of Islamic radicalisation, and the *why* of CIA interventions and assassinations. We also covered the older, but equally disastrous, European incursions into Islamic heartland.

We made a number of 'denied evil' observations: that such evil often surfaces when we go overseas, inevitably projecting it onto our 'enemies' (like George Bush did with his 'axis of evil'); and that it often has deep – very deep – roots.

The next week, sparked by the Speer quote, Robert from his US evangelical background spoke of his discovery that the idea of Jewish genocide did not just magically appear but came out of the Church. The story was that it was the Jews who killed Jesus, going all the way back to the second century.

'And as such they were not fit to live.'

'Yes, and where better for evil to remain invisible than in the Church,' I mused. 'But you know, we said that too - about Aboriginal people,' I continued. 'They were not fit to live because they were not human.'

At that, we both fell silent. Then:

'You know, when slaves arrived in the States, they were 'seasoned' (he indicated the quotation as he spoke) by their new owners. One third died. They weren't people either. I guess when nursery history came in the front door the truth, and our humanity, went out the back,' he concluded, with feeling.

So New York, we finally felt, was less a loss of innocence as a loss of unreality, like a boomerang just

waiting to return to the thrower, especially to something so symbolically rigidly Western as the Twin Towers.

And then Robert took his opportunity one day and said wasn't my own ground zero the same as New York, set up by events before.

Oh. So now it was my turn.

Eventually I spoke of my dog, Ben, how when I got him from a dog refuge, he was the one at the back of the cage. He did not bark for some weeks.

'So why did you choose him?'

And the memory came of my mother telling me that hugging was not her family's thing. Nor my father's. Nothing premeditated – hugging back then was just not the done thing. I mean, how un-Australian!

'So you chose Ben because you felt at the back of the cage too?'

And then I remembered that just as Ben did not bark, nor did I (talk in my case) until I was nearly five.

'Maybe. But he was a dog in a million. So not a bad choice,' I replied.

So there it was – me, one in a long line of the un-hugged. And we discussed that fact, how un-huggedness is generational, which is no doubt why I find it hard to tell my sons I love them – not to mention my wife.

'Australia, the land of the great un-hugged.'

'You have a way with words.'

'Just joining the dots,' Robert said, grinning. 'Maybe that answers your question, you know, about why is it so hard to receive that Aboriginal embrace.' (I had told him about the commemoration).

'How so?'

'Well, rejected people not only find it hard to hug, but also to receive hugs when they are given.'

'You mean me?'

His non-response gave his answer.

'Maybe you're right,' I eventually replied. 'But why?'

'Too proud to receive?' he queried.

'Or maybe feeling too guilty. Our history is unbelievably bad, you know.'

'Well you are not alone. Have you by any chance read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown? …'

We then talked about how Australia was often a home for 'rejects' from other lands, and how in families the rejected child can get locked into forever trying to win their parents' approval.

'Maybe,' I commented, 'that was why when asked by the motherland to make the ultimate sacrifice in World War I for King and Empire, with God thrown in, we so enthusiastically and unquestioningly did. And for the privilege of being placed where the fighting was fiercest, reflected in loss of life, we were meant to give thanks.'

'And that you did?' he asked, incredulous.

'And that we did.'

As we talked, for my part the resolution grew: if I was ever to understand why the sky fell down on Aboriginal people, why we did as we did at Myall Creek and elsewhere right across Australia, I would need to engage the 1830s convict un-hugged world at a far, far deeper level than I had.

That colonial world is my own inherited story, after all.

Our meetings finished abruptly. Robert returned home, but not before noting Ben now barks, and I now talk. I was grateful that even as a corporate executive he had made the time. We had travelled far together.

And I had acquired a taste for noodles and green tea.

He died suddenly not so long ago. Heart attack.

Friendship is precious.

8

Time to move on

My theory is simple. Where you spend your childhood is what shapes you. That is why the need to find out about my Aussie childhood.

All my grandparents were Brits – Scots, Welsh, and English. Yet somehow in me a distinctly Aussie character evolved. It just happened. It could not be contained by the 'home' country, even if it wanted to be. So here I am, a British-Australian for sure, but native born – an Aussie.

My wife Sallie on the other hand was born in Scotland, did her high school there, and whilst her mother was Australian, her father was Scottish to the end. She did spend some primary years in a place called Melbourne (it is on most maps), but with seemingly little impact.

Well, such a marriage has to carry heavy historical baggage. I mean, didn't the convicts of 1838 also serve at Her Majesty's pleasure? And wasn't the early colony deeply divided, where those in power – the Governor, the Church – were definitely separate and above, superior to, the convicts?

Early on in our marriage, in an unguarded moment, Sallie did say she felt superior to me (what did I do?) But it was not something she liked to own, not something you would wish to admit to – if you get my drift.

But *of course* her ways were best, not said in words, but held in an assumed right that went deeper than conscious thought. In fact that was just the problem. It was so effortlessly superior, it could not be engaged by any rational thought, the one thing I was so good at.

Not that I haven't tried to rebel. I have tried to raise my own flag and secure my independence like they did in America (and here I was thinking I was the sane one). And yet, for all my protests and appeals for sanity, the Union Jack still flies in the corner of our family – and national – flag.

But this morning I am finding, sitting in our garden shed with mug of tea in hand, this national and yet very personal family dynamic is a true but hard admission.

Why hard?

Well, I have been curiously comfortable, I realise, with being a convict. If she, Establishment-like, has been unwilling to face the fall-out of decisions made in the rarified air of always knowing best and the impossibility of ever making a mistake, haven't I only played out my colonial convict role, the unwilling yet willing victim?

It takes two to tango after all.

I try to imagine what Aboriginal people must have felt when this co-dependent family phenomenon called civilisation arrived in Botany Bay in 1788! In fact I tried to paint this imagining, copying a picture I confess, and it didn't turn out too bad (which translated from convict-speak means I surprised myself it turned out so well). I hung it in our lounge room. No-one has offered to buy it, but no matter. It is not for sale. The painting is of an Aboriginal man peering at this scene of early settlement with a look of an utterly astonished bewilderment.

Well, no wonder. Convict and soldier, governor or parson, they all looked equally part of the same silliness. As no doubt lookers-on of our co-dependent marriage would have similarly observed. But time for us surely, marriage and nation, to move on. Time to grow up and stand on our own feet. I think even the Queen is secretly wishing it would happen.

9

Sydney Friends of Myall Creek

So what else happened in these last five missing years?

Sallie and I did still go to the Myall Creek Memorial commemoration held every Queen's birthday weekend (would you believe), staying in a hotel or motel. One time we stayed with a farmer. My host did not hesitate to point out flat top mountains at the back of his property. He explained it is a popular spot for hang gliders. Recently one Japanese man died attempting it. It was a big story. Then he added, 'It was also where local Aborigines were thrown over'.

'Oh …' His comment was all the more impactful because only the year before on the way to Myall Creek we camped in a national park near the highland country town of Walcha. There was a deep gorge, and as we walked around its rim we read plaques describing what we were seeing when out of nowhere, without apology appeared the plaque: 'Opposite is where local Aboriginal people were pushed over'.

And then, as if on that path already mapped out for me, I co-founded the Sydney Friends of Myall Creek to work alongside the national committee. And then again, as sometimes happens, you are in the right place at the right time, and I was elected to the national committee. A farmer had unexpectedly nominated me in his stead. He felt more interest needed to be generated from where the power and money is – Sydney, where I come from.

Why me? I had no idea.

Then last May something very special happened. Sydney Friends held an event in the New South Wales Parliament. One-third of the MPs came. It was held very appropriately in the Jubilee Room – the Jubilee being the year all debts were cancelled in ancient Israel (what a fund of information I am).

And what a magic night it was.

The always humble Governor of New South Wales, Her Professor Excellency Marie Bashir, came (or is it Excellency Professor? – I never did master her proper form of address). And that despite being double-booked and having to rush out early to change for her next event. Hosted by MPs Bryce Gaudry and Linda Burney (she being the only State Aboriginal MP), the deputy-Premier and our only Aboriginal Federal MP also spoke. As did Aunty Sue Blacklock and Myall Creek gang descendant Beulah Adams – and yours truly.

There was a photo on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald the next day (the very same paper that in 1838 wrote, 'The whole gang of black animals are not worth the money the colonists will have to pay for printing the silly court documents.')

Aunty Sue was seated together with Beulah and, incredibly, Helen Lo Schiavo, a descendant of William Hobbs – the man key in bringing the massacre to justice. Helen somehow materialised out of thin air, completing the three strands of the story – those who were killed, those who killed, and those who brought it to justice. The photo is all the more striking for its contrast, with dark-skinned Sue dressed in dark red and black, sitting next to very fair skinned Helen, dressed in white.

With all those MPs and others invited from the phonebook, it was wall-to-wall. Novel to see MPs sitting on the floor.

But why so many?

In 2000 things had seemed so hopeful. We had that incredible sorry march by hundreds of thousands across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and when Aboriginal Cathy Freeman won the 400m Olympic final the whole nation cheered her on. Even this very Parliament, just before our own Myall Creek Memorial launch, passed a motion expressing their support for us.

But then we ended up with a government in Canberra who can't say sorry, who has dismantled Aboriginal organisations using their dysfunction as an excuse, and who now always knows best with one-size-fits-all Aboriginal 'solutions', even suspending the Racial Discrimination Act to do it.

So maybe our event was a small flickering flame of hope in our national darkness, though in the planning we did not see it as anything so grand.

Linda sent me a longer-than-usual email the next morning: 'Fantastic evening L'. If she as an Aboriginal person felt that, then I figure others did also. I felt then as if not only Sydney Friends of Myall Creek was launched that night, but as if in some odd way I was also.

10

Dash to make history

Here I am, later in 2005, passing time on a Newcastle beach. I have come with *Demons at Dusk* author, Peter Stewart, for a Myall Creek committee meeting at Myall Creek. His book, an historical novel, tells the story of the massacre and, as you would expect for someone with a social passion, Peter runs a car park company.

I conclude not for the first time that I like unpretentious Newcastle with its beautiful beaches and working harbour. Peter arrives from doing something called business, and off we go to Tamworth, a four-hour drive, then to Myall Creek tomorrow, a further two hours. We head through the built-up lower Hunter Valley. He says he has some racehorses stabled here.

Clearly a man of many parts.

Our talk moves from how Aboriginal culture seems more akin to the southern African Saan (Bushman) than black African – and, oh, by the way have you seen *The Gods Must Be Crazy* – to the very surprising co-incidence that his wife taught in newly independent Zimbabwe at the same time I did. He reminds me he has already told me that twice before. We then talk about Maori and Zulu cultures, how they were both war-like, both displacing the people before them – the Moriori and Bushman respectively.

'Who were then both in turn displaced by the British,' he contributes.

We move onto how determined denial can be, and of the concept of projection, where you put onto others what you have not faced in yourself. And by the way, I am

grateful for the air-conditioning for I notice the outside temperature is now 36 degrees.

Peter and I have attended all the Myall Creek meetings from that very first 1998 meeting when the rain came down. He says that it was when a candle was lit at the beginning of the prayers that the rain started, and just when the prayers stopped, so did the rain. Like me he recalls the eerie sense. I had always thought the raindrops were tears of grieving but he tells me one Aboriginal woman said to him they were tears of joy.

And we agree they could have been both.

We arrive in Tamworth and book into to a functional motel – this one has air-conditioning – then go to a nearby club for dinner. It has a forty-years-ago feel, all Anglo, lay-back, friendly people. After our Aussie-Chinese (pretty awful) food we take our leave of the two lone ladies on the dance-floor jiving to a live band.

Well bed, then breakfast, then off to Myall Creek. The drive is familiar and we arrive spot on time. The chairs are already out when we pull up. On time, at 10.30 sharp, we start (is this Australia?) The tennis courts I notice are now semi-jungle. There are about thirty of us, from all over. Most I do not know. The Aboriginal people I notice prefer to sit in the back row.

Or is it that we prefer to sit in the front?

White John and black Uncle Lyall with their respective light and dark Akubra hats chair the meeting. John Brown in another life could have been a colonial administrator and Lyall Munro the leader of armed resistance, so before my eyes is what could have been if only we had done what we are doing now. Two hundred years plus just to have an all-cards-on-the-table conversation (like my marriage!)

The concept for a world-class education and cultural centre is put before us. The local Federal MP, Tony

Windsor, says it should go direct to the Prime Minister. It is finally decided, thankfully and logically, to let the Aboriginal elders decide where it should be located.

But we are unanimous it go ahead.

We finish spot on time. Well, there and back is sixteen hours driving for a one-and-a-half hour meeting, but worth it – for in case you missed it, this is making history.

Coleslaw and sliced silverside sandwich in hand, we head home south through mostly open spectacular country. I ask Peter if he has gone overseas with his book.

'Someone recommended Germany.'

'Why is that? Because they've done the hard yards on their own history?'

'I was just thinking the same thing.'

I tell him about this book, and he mentions how in his book he had used the summing up of the Myall Creek trial by the judge – had I read it? Well, I must have, because I had read his book, but for the life of me cannot remember. Clearly skilled at multi-tasking, he reaches over to the back seat to get a copy, somehow staying on the road. I decide it must be important.

1838, the 15th of December.

The court is quiet and all eyes are on Justice Burton, talking to the accused:

'I cannot expect that any words of mine can reach your hearts, but I hope that the grace of God can reach them, for nothing else could reach those hardened hearts which could slay fathers, mothers and infants and surround the funeral pyre to consign their mangled bodies to the flames.

'There is striking proof of your guilt, for it pleased God in his providence the day before this crime was committed to send rain on the earth, through which your tracks to the fatal spot were easily traced. From the hut to

the spot where the deed was committed there were the traces of horsemen on either side, and the naked feet of blacks in the middle. This affords the strongest corroboration of the evidence provided by the man Anderson.'

I suddenly look up.

A semi-trailer is coming at us in the middle of the road! Peter swerves, narrowly missing a roadside marker.

'No worries mate,' he says, calmly.

I drag myself back to court.

'I cannot think that men like you, educated in some principles of religion and speaking the English language would have been guilty of a crime like this unless you thought you would be screened from public justice. You might have flattered yourselves you would have been protected and screened – many did seek to conceal it, none endeavouring to bring it to light – but unhappy men, what you did was seen by God.

'I do my duty as a judge, but as a man I feel the awful situation in which you are placed. Whatever motive could have induced you to commit this crime, and I trust that there were none other than mentioned in the indictment, but that you were moved and seduced by the devil. If they were not your only motives, if you did act at the instigation of the others, I trust it will be brought to light and they will be equally answerable to the law as you have been.'

The judge finally commits them to 'be hanged by the neck until your bodies be dead, and may the Lord have mercy on your souls'.

No longer in the courtroom, I find we are not far from Newcastle where I will catch my train back to Sydney. I comment that of course four of the eleven were not hung

and one in particular, James Lamb, had always seemed sinister. Peter says that was probably because he was with Major Nunn in the earlier military massacres like at Waterloo Creek, and to hang him would be to put not only Nunn but the then acting Governor Snodgrass – and indeed the whole colonial Establishment – in the dock also.

Quite.

Over the Hunter River we go, and on into Newcastle. But not before we cross Windeyer Creek. This registers for as a boy I sometimes went to a Camp Windeyer scout camp, no doubt on land donated by the Windeyer family, to this day a prominent legal family. At the Myall Creek trial the lawyer for the defence was a Mr. Windeyer. This creek is more than likely named after him.

Windeyer had been employed to defend the eleven convicts by the ironically named 'Black Association'. Formed by Henry Dangar (same one) it was an unheard of alliance, accused convicts and squatter-landowners coming together to fight a common foe – the truth.

A few years later, in 1842, Windeyer gave a public lecture on the topic *On the rights of the Aborigines of Australia.* Historian Henry Reynolds calls it perhaps 'the most sustained and intellectually powerful attack on Aboriginal rights ever mounted in early colonial Australia'. What Reynolds picks up, and me too, was that Windeyer's own legal analysis had not satisfied him.

'How is it our minds are not satisfied?' Windeyer had concluded. 'What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?' – the theme of one of Reynold's books.

We pull into Newcastle station. I thank Peter – he refuses my offer of petrol money (I would have thanked him anyway). I take my leave and look for a ticket. The ticket office is closed, so I ask an employee. He wordlessly

points to a machine. I go over and again say hello. Again, no reply. Fortunately I have an appropriate note.

The train arrives. Very nearly dark, the view is still great, looking over the harbour. I get out a bit of light reading – *American Theocracy: the peril and politics of radical religion, oil and borrowed money*. All goes serenely well. I read in silence, with just the muted clickety-clack of the train. An hour goes by, and we pull in at a large station. Suddenly several teenagers intrude rudely into my space, one boy and the rest, as you would imagine, are girls. It doesn't take long to work out some are drunk.

Didn't they read the sign 'No drinking. Fines apply'?

The noise and swearing escalate. Some go downstairs, where I gather one is throwing up. End of my serenity. As they come back up, someone says,

'Doesn't matter, no-one's here.'

No-one is here! And suddenly, in this trivial event, it hits me. How damaging that dreaded 'terra nullius' idea would have been, telling Aboriginal people until the 1990s, that before white man nobody was here.

I get my stuff as we approach my stop. Two of the girls are in the in-between carriage section. I give them a pained look. They pass by me, but one pauses just long enough to say: 'Sorry.'

And suddenly they too become people, faces behind the news of teenage binge drinking. They are off to the big city to have their good time, even if already jaded, yet another canary in our national coalmine, already quite unable to sing – and it is only 10 o'clock (my bedtime).

I get off, and outside the station my teenage son is waiting. I realise I am not terra nullius to him.

And I make sure I thank him for picking me up.

11

Longing for a better place

I am sitting in historic Brush Farm House in my home district of Ryde in Sydney. You know, Wallumetta country.

Why am I here?

My eye was drawn to the title of a Brush Farm book talk: 'Tour to Hell'. 'I've been there,' I thought, but it was not however referring to a dark night of the soul, but to our convict beginnings, a world I have been wanting to engage since my talks with Robert.

The presenter begins by telling us to imagine we are sitting on the front porch in 1791, and seeing in the distance a group of twenty or so Irish convicts. Ah, yes, I can just make them out. Those with red hair are a dead giveaway.

Recently arrived, they are in fact escaping en masse from the government (not unlike many of us today), into that formidable and forbidding Australian bush. Were they crazy? Well yes, completely, for it seems they believed China was only 150 miles to the north. I guess anywhere else was a better bet than where they were.

Maybe the early governors felt that pathos too for they seemed lenient to those recaptured, perhaps thinking they had had punishment enough. Fully two-thirds of those first escaped male Irish convicts were later listed as either missing or dead, and certainly it is peculiarly difficult to punish the dead or missing, even for the British.

But the dream was stubborn.

Apart from China, or Timor, rumour spread also of white people living inland, across the mountains west of Sydney. Escapees at first were Irish who had not lost their imaginations, but then even the English convicts started going missing.

To be fair, given their lives no wonder the English convicts lacked imagination. By contrast the Irish tended to be convicted for lesser crimes connected with providing for family in conditions where one potato represented dinner. So their heart fires still burned on, no doubt the reason for the only two rebellions on Aussie soil being led by the Irish.

But for the English convicts to re-discover hope – this was indeed serious. Governors Hunter and King both sent expeditions to disprove once and for all such myths as whites living inland, only to find Aboriginal people there who conveyed indeed there *were* such people!

I smile at this. Maybe they were just keen to get rid of the intruders. Or maybe through bush telegraph they were in fact thinking of the fairer skinned traders of Northern Australia, thousands of kilometers away. Maybe reports of an inland sea came from there too. Maybe.

An absurd story?

Well how completely different and dislocating was this place on the other side of the world, how very hard, even desperate. We all need hope. Perhaps that is why even a pregnant woman set off for China, or was it Timor?

And, the speaker suggests, it seems the Establishment too had their own longing for a better place, the driver behind our explorers' desperate obsession to find an inland sea or at least the mighty Mississippi River equivalent, rather than the desert they did find with its salt lakes with names like Lake Disappointment. No, Australia for many could be a bitter pill. So no surprise that escape

myths lasted, he says, right up until actual overland colonies were finally birthed at Melbourne and Adelaide in the 1830s.

And into my mind comes my Scottish grandmother, the heavy curtains drawn against the harsh Australian sun, as she saw it. She was in Scotland still, unable to come to terms with the pain of parting from her sisters and landing in this strange, sunny upside-down land at the end of the earth, where many trees never lose their leaves, mice hop, birds squawk, and mammals lay eggs – in those days a place of no return.

Suddenly I hear a woman, no, not my grandmother, asking us to get our tickets ready for the door prize. 'F 49!' One of the few other brave men who have shown up (not an Aussie male thing, books) puts up his hand. Blast! But wait. There is a second draw! 'F 52'. A woman puts up her hand. It is his wife! Is there nowhere safe from corruption? I too find myself longing for a better place.

But what is happening?

Just when things looked darkest, the couple have decided that since they have already won one prize, to put the wife's prize back in.

'F 67.' I can't believe it! I double-check my ticket. No, it is true. I have actually won. Me!

I take my gift and quickly and quietly take my leave, looking again over the green ever-so-English garden. And I muse (clutching my prize lest the sponsors, my local Council, want it back for next year), despite the enormous odds some convicts did win the lottery.

Just like me.

And as I re-enter the 21st century it suddenly occurs to me – those completely crazy people were absolutely right. There really *was* an inland sea.

You would never believe it on the sun-seared surface of Central Australia, but the water *is* there, deep below. It is called the Great Artesian Basin, a vast *underground* sea.

2006

Tasmania

12

Debra

She is the last of a panel of four Aboriginal women speakers. I am sitting in the New South Wales Parliament theatrette. Since the Sydney Friends of Myall Creek launch I have been to a few such 'reconciliation' meetings.

Debra tells us she was born in south-east Tasmania in 1959 and her great-great grandmother was Fanny Cochrane Smith, the last Tasmanian full-blood Aboriginal (but what about Truganini, dying in 1876? I then think I am doubting her because she looks, well, white. I decide to stop my judging and do something I often have such great difficulty with – listen.)

At eighteen months old, welfare removed her and three of her siblings due to neglect. Only thing was, in the *Bringing Them Home Report*, a report on the Aboriginal stolen generations about children taken from their parents, her story was investigated in great detail.

Their finding?

There was no neglect.

She later found out she was taken because she looked too white to be in an Aboriginal family. She was placed in several foster homes before the one where she was to stay for the next fifteen years.

She was five when the foster father first abused her. Then her foster brothers joined in. This continued right through her early life, together with cruel beatings from the foster mother, unwarranted and inexplicable. She kept quiet, terrified if she told anyone she would be sent to a children's home.

She had no memory of her original family, only told they were from the gutter, earning her the nickname 'gutter child' at one school. Her real mother unknowingly enrolled her later siblings at schools she was at, so she was moved by school authorities, four times in four years. Later she read in her welfare file of the desperation of her natural parents pleading for her return.

At 15 she was intimidated into signing adoption papers, but then escaped, living for a while on the streets. Finally she got a job and a place to live. By the age of twenty she had found the courage to go to those who had removed her, still in the same building where she had gone for 'check-ups', determined to find her family.

Day after day she sat in reception and eyeballed the staff.

After two weeks a man emerged, took her into a room and pointed to a manila folder on the table. As he left he said 'you have half an hour'. She managed to get her parents' and siblings' names, including the two born after she was taken away. She still has that piece of paper. She found out later that man had risked his job to do what he did.

After almost two years she found them – nearby. As she sat outside the family home, she questioned whether they would want to see her but when the door opened she knew it was her mum. It was an unspoken mutual recognition. They just stood – not knowing what to do or say. She met some of her siblings, but not her father. She thought she could leave her questions for later, but there would be no later. Two weeks later her mother died.

'As I was stolen from her, now she was stolen from me.'

For the next twenty-five years Debra immersed herself in her culture. She came to accept that aspects of her identity would never be restored. The years of abuse had left her with a difficult path to 'build myself up'. She says her four beautiful children have also suffered because of the generational fallout of her removal, yet carry no bitterness.

In 1999 the National Sorry Day Committee asked her to form a branch in Tasmania. Over one thousand came to their first event. She talks proudly of Tasmania as the first state to introduce compensation for their Stolen Generation survivors, challenging other states – and Canberra – to do the same. Governments, she says, cannot heal people, nor take back the policies and actions which led to the destruction of so many lives, but they can truthfully acknowledge mistakes.

Said Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon:

On behalf of the Tasmanian Government I wish to extend a personal apology to you. The experience of being removed from your family and community was the product of past policies and practices that were wrong and unjust. While no amount of money can make up for what happened to you and other Aboriginal children, as Premier of Tasmania I am sorry for the suffering you have experienced.

There is, she says, still so much work to be done to inform other Australians, to understand Aboriginal hurts and traumas, so wounds may heal. She also speaks of how past injustices have led to divisions among Aboriginal people themselves, adding 'we Aboriginal people need to take responsibility for our emotional and social well-being'. She says she is now pioneering university courses on healing trauma.

As Debra sits down, I sit back, momentarily taking it in with everyone else in the room, in silence, shamed at my easy judging of her.

And there and then I decide.

I have to go to Tasmania where, it seems, the mainland colonial story of conflict was compressed into a few tragic and terrible decades.

13

Heart of Deepest Darkness

It is now a few months down the track from my meeting Debra. In my everyday busyness and self-importance, I so easily lose the light on the path I am walking. But that evening with Debra has changed me, stayed with me, calling to me to go on a further journey, a reluctant journey into what I call Australia's heart of deepest darkness.

From my reading one thing is clear. The heart and heartless views of Australia were around long before the First Fleet.

"The inhabitants of this country are the miserablest people in the world ... setting aside their human shape they differ little from brutes," wrote William Dampier in *Voyage Round the World*, a bestseller. Dampier had seen Aboriginal people in 1688 on the north-west coast of Australia.

James Cook, who charted the east coast a century later, had different eyes.

"These people may appear to some to be the most wretched on earth, but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans. They live in a tranquillity which is not disturbed by inequality of condition; the earth and the sea furnish them with all things necessary for life; they covet not magnificent houses and they sleep as sound in a small hovel or even in the open as the king in his palace on a bed of down."

In Tasmania Aboriginal peoples, the Palawa, have been around for 35,000 years, from the beginning of the

last ice age. As the ice melted they were cut off for some 10,000 years until that invasion day in 1803.

A relatively small people, with tightly curled hair and skin from black to reddish-brown, their extended family life was close-knit. Children were indulged, and enjoyed. For some two thousand generations they had walked their hunting grounds, camping in caves and rock shelters, fishing, hunting, gathering food. Their unique heritage testifies to the oldest cultural continuity on earth.

Tasmania was earlier named Van Diemen's Land by Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1642, after the Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company – but it was eventually named after himself anyway. Next came the French in 1772, promptly shooting some Aboriginal people. Then in 1803 the more systematic British set up their convict outpost of Empire, and raised the Union Jack.

Between 1803 and the 1830s the Palawa went from some several thousand to less than seventy-five. Disease played its part, aided and abetted by a vicious cruelty. On December 1st 1826, the Tasmanian Colonial Times declared that:

We make no pompous display of Philanthropy. The Government must remove the natives – if not, they will be hunted down like wild beasts and destroyed!

And hunted down they were.

Against all humanity and sanity they were shot, trapped in steel traps, mutilated, tortured, little children swung against trees, men having their genitals cut out to see how long they would last, women raped, tied to trees and burned with irons, body parts used as tobacco ornaments. Others were kept as slaves or 'pets', to be exploited at will.

Carried out by convicts, settlers, and police.

But we had not finished.

As Aboriginal people fought back in guerilla hit and run attacks, war was declared, Governor Arthur imposing martial law in November 1828. Aboriginals could be shot on sight. To this a bounty of five pounds for each adult, two pounds for each child was later added, the preferred option to selling them as slaves or killing by poisoning, trapping or hunting them with dogs. It was singularly effective. In 1829 thirty Aboriginal people were thrown off a cliff at Cape Grim. Back then they called it Victory Hill.

But even then we had not finished.

In 1830 those who had survived were taken to Flinders Island, under the misguided 'care' of missionary George Robinson, who had earlier persuaded Aboriginal people in more remote areas to come to settlements – where most died of disease.

Flinders Island was a similarly fatal mistake. Away from their own tribal lands, malnourished, by 1847 only forty-seven had survived. Moved south to Oyster Cove, an abandoned prison considered too unhealthy for convicts, they were paraded for dignitaries on special occasions.

By 1859 only twelve were left.

And I stop. What did these twelve feel? Imagine. Surely what most died of was a broken spirit.

The last Oyster Cove male to die was William Lanney, patronisingly labelled King Billy. Born on Flinders Island he went to Oyster Cove as a teenager, becoming a sailor and then whaler. In 1860 he met Prince Albert, being by now of great interest as a kind of living relic. He died in his room on March 2, 1868, at the Dog and Partridge public house in Hobart.

He was thirty-three.

Truganini (or Trugernanner) was the last person left at Oyster Cove. Born in 1812 she was the daughter of Mangana, chief of the Bruny Island people. In her life she had experienced her mother stabbed to death, her sister kidnapped, and her intended husband drowned before her – those responsible then raping her. But Truganini was courageous, working in the early 1830s to unify the indigenous survivors of The Black Wars. In 1830 Truganini with husband Woorrady under Robinson's persuasion helped take her people to Flinders Island in the hope of protecting them from further violence. When in 1856 the few left were removed to Oyster Bay, she went with them. By 1873 she was alone there and moved to Hobart where she died on May 7, 1876.

But we had not finished.

Truganini as she was dying pleaded with the doctor, 'Don't let them cut me up.' She had good reason to be afraid. She had already witnessed the mutilation of young William Lanney's body. There was by then a thriving trade in Aboriginal body parts, especially Tasmanian, thought to be a separate race. Their demise seen as evidence of natural selection at work, they were deemed doomed to extinction in the face of such an assumed superior race and civilisation.

Truganini's death very neatly confirmed the theory. Aboriginal remains went to Australian and European research institutions, skulls being used by the University of Melbourne trying to prove a hierarchy of cerebral capacity.

So what became of Truganini's desperate plea?

After her burial her body was exhumed and her skeleton strung up on wires for public exhibition in

Hobart Museum – until 1947. Only in 1976, on the centenary of her death, were her remains cremated, to the protests of the museum. Her ashes were scattered on the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, close to her birthplace.

But for Truganini, we had not yet finished.

Even then not all of her body was cremated. Museums in Britain still had many bodies. As late as 2002 the Royal College of Surgeons in England returned samples of Truganini's skin and hair. From May 2007 after a twenty year struggle the remains of seventeen Tasmanian Aboriginal people collected through the nineteenth century were being reluctantly returned, having secured a high court injunction to prevent the Natural History Museum in London from continuing invasive tests.

But we *still* had not finished. A deal had to be struck that some of the DNA be kept for possible further tests.

I turn to Mr Dampier.

'Who are the brutes in the end, Mr. Dampier? Didn't we label Aboriginal people 'brutes' so we could justify our own brutality when in the name of science and even God, we took away their land, their culture, their children, their very lives, even their dead bodies, all without permission?'

Silence …

14

Richmond

Tasmania! We must be here for our direct Sydney-Hobart flight has landed, spot on time – even if it has taken me six months since meeting Debra to get here.

He with power behind the hire car counter wants an exorbitant rate but I have proof of my booking. Hand firmly on wallet, we head for Richmond. Someone had recommended we visit Richmond as it has heaps of Myall Creek era colonial buildings. Richmond is roughly on the way to Port Arthur, the infamous convict gaol where we will go tomorrow.

Richmond we soon discover has fully thirty-five buildings on the National Estate register, including oldest bridge, oldest Catholic Church, oldest postal building, oldest gaol … and all built by convicts.

And I am amazed.

How could they make things of such charm?

I then remind myself of my mission in being here. I have come to uncover, behind the undeniable charm, my own colonial roots, to trace how the horrific evil done in scenic, beautiful Tasmania, and endlessly elsewhere in Australia – like at Myall Creek – so effortlessly morphed into respectability.

It is said if you want to know the real values of a society, visit its prisons. I have no idea who said that – but that is anyway what we will do. So we head first for, unsurprisingly, the Richmond gaol, paying our modest entry fee to a lady who I decide must be one of the old

inmates still serving time. Maybe she is employed to set the sombre scene – if so, she is doing a good job.

Built in 1825, the prison, not large, has a quadrangle formed by stone buildings on each side. On our left are the solitary cells for men. I enter one, a metre by just over two, with minimal light. For trivial offences you could spend thirty-one days on bread and water, with only one blanket (it is seriously cold here in winter).

And what if you suffered from claustrophobia, like I am?

Next side is the chain gangs' budget accommodation where in one relatively small room up to forty slept each night. Four kilogram chains were permanently attached on their ankles, increased to 13.5 if you were bad.

I try one on, the 'bad' one. I cannot move it.

Just off the quadrangle in a walled-off corner is what could be the gaol gym. The wooden tripod however turns out to be a whipping post. Floggings, often done by convicts themselves, or ex-convicts, were frequent. The doctor had to attend, which seemed to make it all alright.

The third side has a bakery, plus the women's solitary unit. Only at this level of the social ladder were women on par with men.

9.1.1837 Elizabeth, for absconding, 25 days solitary.
2.2.1838 Emma, for insolence, 21 days.
8.3.1838 Mary R, being in a disorderly house, 2 days.

The goal, I read, was to turn the whole of Tasmania (then called Van Dieman's Land) into a giant gaol, with Richmond as but one of its cell blocks. There was to be total vigilance, every detail recorded from scars to eye colour.

What a breathtaking vision for a new nation.

19.7.1837 William, absenting and having two pounds, one year in irons.

10.10.1837 John, *suspicion* of stealing a shirt, 7 days solitary.

24.12.1837 James, a ticket-of-leave, drunk in church, 6 months chain gang

The last side we discover is the two-storey gaoler's *family* residence. Weird!

Those not destroyed by such experiences only seemed to emerge more unbowed. No wonder throughout its life – a prison until 1853 and gaol until 1928 – there were numerous attempts at escape, some very inventive.

Mad to try, but equally mad not to.

Sallie goes back into solitary, and I sit in the courtyard. How pleasant. The seat is under a flowering plum blossom. The bees are busy and it is bathed in the afternoon sun. Serenity. And I wonder how many here ever found serenity in a plum blossom.

I rescue my wife from solitary and we make a daring escape from what seems to have been an utterly love-less place, sneaking past the grim gaoler who is too busy reading her magazine to notice. I hear they sell plastic ball-and-chain sets but do not check it out. In fact emerging outside I am somewhat sobered, even sad.

What a place, what a way, to waste a life.

The church is next, separated from all this ugliness by a field and a fence or two. I turn to look back to the front of the gaoler's house. And from this public side I am struck that the façade looks like a normal home.

The church is Anglican. Inside a tattered Union Jack commemorates those who served Empire in World War I with the inscription: 'Greater love hath no man.' I climb the pulpit imagining my position on high over my

1830s congregation, exhorting them to live just and sober lives. Heights however make me dizzy, especially this one, so I come back down, to earth.

On the way down I suddenly think of that meddlesome early missionary Lancelot Threlkeld, who seemingly alone noted the *real* colonial driver was not Church, but Rum. "Rum built hospitals, Rum built our palaces, Rum erected our churches, and Rum was the circulating medium which even paid preachers to teach men 'to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present evil world.'"

From the church we stroll (you have to stroll in a place like this) and come to a school, built in 1834 and *still* going strong. Each day started with a blessing:

'Good morning, Miss.'

'God bless you, Miss.'

'God bless you, sir' – well, none of my many classes ever said that to me! But how nice to be blessed every day. I am finding it hard though to connect this with the gaol just down the road.

Back to the car we buckle up and head to Port Arthur. We still had twenty heritage buildings to see, but anyway what a timely introduction to my quest to find society in the 1830s. All fairly intact courtesy of the fact that Richmond, once Van Diemen's Land's third largest town and an important military and convict outpost, was thankfully bypassed when a bridge was put in.

Home for the next two days is a small cottage at the top end of the Port Arthur harbour. Rounding a bend, we find it – 'Hire with Dennis'. The sign impressively says full. We expect a crowd, but discover we are it. No matter for I am welcomed with 'Hello, Graeme' from someone who I guess to be Dennis' wife. She says it as if I am a long lost friend.

It is a beautiful spot, won an award for budget accommodation. We cook an un-colonial multi-cultural Greek supermarket Italian dinner, and turn in early for a full day tomorrow.

15

‘A machine to grind rogues honest’

Port Arthur. Here at last. I am feeling expectant, hopeful of more insights into my 1830s un-hugged white world. Un-hugged would have to be an understatement, as Port Arthur was a place of ‘secondary punishment’ for those who misbehaved elsewhere.

Another was Norfolk Island, equally infamous.

Together with our entry tickets, we are given a poker card and head downstairs to a museum built in the shape of a wooden hull.

The poker card I find is not a Tasmanian addiction but refers to the convict lottery of life. Each card is a person. Mine is Abraham Baker. He interests me. A religious man, he felt Port Arthur was not being run well. He wrote to the commandant, for which he was given *75* lashes. Even so, undeterred, he continued his principled protest and was sent to a chain gang for three months.

Our Port Arthur prison journey starts in England. Standing before my own recorded message judge, I am sent to Van Diemen’s Land, the very end of the world (which is where I am). My crime? I can take my pick: petty larceny, burglary, stealing livestock, forgery, receiving stolen goods, prostitution, embezzlement, or poaching. Draconian punishment, surely, for relatively minor crimes, crimes I imagine birthed in poverty.

That is, if you survived the trip out.

Convicts were locked together below deck in cells with no beds – for *six* months on the high seas. As one officer remarked, ‘The slave trade is merciful to what I have seen’. With death rates at one in four, the dead thrown

overboard even as they arrived, was it conscience or that it made economic sense that payment would only be made for those delivered *alive*?

This translated into places to sleep, exercise on deck and better food. Even so the free settlers could now be exploited, for they had to pay in advance.

We meet our guide, Sarah. She remarks it is a fine day in a way which makes me think fine days are rare here. She then tells us prison overseers ruled like kings and were deeply resented; that the rows of trees around the church show the importance of religion; that the very beautiful gardens walled off the senior officials' houses from the prison itself.

She then tells a story of colonial logic. In the beginning prisoners grew their own veggies. When Arthur the Governor visited he was furious. It was unthinkable that they should enjoy such a privilege. End of garden. End of some convicts too as they started to die of scurvy.

Our tour starts with the Government House Gardens, faithfully re-created with imported trees and a classic central fountain. The central path leads up to the grand house that once was, kept for visiting VIPs which is just what we imagine ourselves to be, members of a royal commission into the prison system. The walls are still intact but all else is in the imagination.

Which, strangely, feels OK.

Next door, slightly up the hill, is the very sizable – indeed beautiful – church shell. Up to 1100 worshipped here at any one time. Lost to photos is the very fine convict interior woodwork. The twin pillars of this society – Church and Commandant's house – stand at the highest points at either end of Port Arthur.

Sarah remarks when flogging failed there was always God. Church was a key cog in the prison machine,

attendance compulsory. Marched in by armed guards, their irons clanging, convicts heard sermons from a *three*-tiered pulpit (no room here for fear of heights). Stressing obedience to laws of both God and King, it was a case of 'woe unto you' if you didn't. There was probably a long list of woes.

'Hell of a lot!' I imagine a convict whispering.

Apparently church was inclusive until the working-class Wesleyan pastors, who had some rapport with the convicts, were replaced by middle-class Anglicans. When in 1843 the Very Reverend Durham gave vent to his hatred of Catholics, Catholics then refused point blank to attend, which led to the appointment of a priest. Common sense in a place like this? A number then converted to Catholicism as the sermons were shorter.

The Reverend Durham's wife fed servants the same food as her dogs, and was no doubt perplexed why no-one wanted to work for her. And yet, for all that, visitors record finding the convict choir 'of considerable effect'.

Past the houses of the privileged, complete with their charming patterned wallpaper and fireplaces and fine furniture and list of leisure activities – boat and horse races, walking, bathing, hunting, fishing, picnics, musical evenings, visiting, chess, social drinking – we cross the class line to the prison itself.

Our guide says be prepared to be surprised, and I truly am. Believe it or not, Port Arthur was in fact a model of prison *reform*.

Based on Pentonville prison in England, it was inspired by a Jeremy Bentham – hard labour and flogging was out, 'mind-tampering' in. There were four reform cornerstones: discipline and punishment; religious and moral instruction; classification and separation; training and education. How orderly – in Bentham's own words,

'a machine for grinding rogues honest', backed up by 'hell or heaven, where are you headed?' sermons. In fact those 'saved' gained many benefits, like early release!

A far cry from Richmond, the cells are bigger, have natural light, a desk and a shelf. Plus they had one hour exercise a day. The theory was that in solitude and silence they could contemplate on their lives, the guards obliging by wearing slippers so as not to make any noise.

It all sounds promising, but somehow still feels a bit weird. And sure enough we are told prisoners were called by number, not name. Also outside their cell they had to wear a hood, in church included, as if in their compulsory anonymity they could be coerced into turning to God. One James Badhouse seems to have been quick on the uptake: 'We found very little reformation on religious principles'.

Our guide adds it was built on good intentions. (I immediately think of the missionary, George Robinson). Then, as if uncomfortable with her own words, she adds with a self-conscious laugh: 'Of course, the road to hell is paved with good intentions'.

And next, as if on cue, we come to the punishment cell. It is tiny, no vent, with three foot thick stone walls – absolute sensory deprivation. I go in, but this time, without hesitating, I flee – to the asylum next door. Was this deliberate? Now they have been made mad, give them good food, space and light to recover. And no doubt some did. The asylum is now a museum which we are told we can explore after lunch, after our boat trip.

Next, the 'control room'. Now that looks important. This place is nothing if not about control. But not before we pass by the Paupers' House and Hospital, and after them the place for the elderly – the prison forerunners, I

guess, of our modern welfare net, nursing homes and places for the mentally ill.

And it all began here – in a *prison*.

Here in a prison are the British cradle to grave institutional foundations of our modern society!

The 'control room' itself is made up of the officers' quarters, the commandant's house and the burnt-out shells of the guard tower and law courts. The restored commandant's house faces the sea. It is filled with music and tapestry activities for the ladies, who were oblivious, it seems, to the convict cries only metres down the hill. Their carefree attitude surprised visitors.

And, finally, the penitentiary itself.

Why am I not surprised to hear in this ever-so-ordered place with all its rules and cornerstones and writing down every last detail, that it was never planned as a penitentiary. Originally a mill, it is a huge four storey building. And I wonder when it was they discovered this area was useless for growing crops. And yes, in the bottom are the solitary cells. One level up however is a library, and some used the system to get an education and a trade. Sarah adds there are nightly ghost tours but for me it goes together with the plastic ball-and-chain souvenirs of Richmond.

To end the tour Sarah speaks with some real personal connection of a woman who *refused* to follow the rules. Charlotte Lempriere was the wife of the Commissariat. As such she was obliged to show a subservient femininity, run the household, obey her husband (I look wryly at Sallie), and show cultivated graces.

However when a common soldier's wife died in childbirth, Charlotte dared to team up with a Mrs Cart, a woman of inferior status, to together breastfeed the baby who otherwise would have died. Just recently that baby

girl's descendants returned, tracing their roots. Sarah comments, with emotion, what wonderful consequences flowed from Charlotte's courageous compassion.

As others part for lunch, a man asks about the massacre. Sarah had said not a word. Not Myall Creek, but that day in 1996 when a man opened fire in the Port Arthur café, killing thirty-five (thanks to then courageous politicians Howard and Fisher, gun laws were changed in its wake). She says it was only ten years ago. She mentions the local chemist, and then:

'Why kill them, the two little girls and their mother? You see this is still not history yet. Some were my workmates.'

'Sorry,' the man replies. Sarah just nods. We thank her, and in taking my leave I see the Port Arthur café massacre memorial. There is a plaque with the list of names, three with the same surname.

I pause for a few moments.

The husband and father of that family – how could he ever come to terms with that loss? And how brave it must have been after a week, a month, a year – however long it took – to front up again. And I think, too, of those who risked their lives that day to save others.

But why am I sensitive to such thoughts?

And again it is so much the Myall Creek story – those left behind having witnessed the execution of all their family, those who survived having to courageously face the day with such incomprehensible loss, and also those white men who tried to help.

The story is the same – only the colour is different.

16

Empire in microcosm

After lunch we meander across the large green lawn to a new big wharf and are beckoned on board an equally new big boat. Our boat tour has begun.

We head out into the bay – it is stunningly expansive – and come to a bare headland, Point Puer, which we are duly informed was the model boys' prison. The intention was good we are told, to keep the boys, mostly from British slums, isolated from the older men, the first attempt at a juvenile justice system in the whole Empire (the whole world?)

The children too worked a twelve-hour day, plus school and religious instruction at night. They did have time for play early on, but that was abolished, my guess at the same time as the veggie garden. They still went to church twice on Sundays however. The headland is exposed, with no water – it all had to be rowed across. Hard and harsh, it came with its own gaol area.

And solitary confinement.

Our boat hostess, Joan, who radiates warmth, says you have to keep it in context. In Industrial Revolution Victorian England there was no such thing as childhood. At four you could be sent out to work. At seven you could be tried as an adult and executed, though only at eight transported for life.

The youngest boy here was nine.

I pause to reflect. What a contrast. Aboriginal people had no juvenile justice lock-ups for their children, no prisons, no solitary confinement or 'lunatic asylums'.

As if to remind us of the harsh realities, just beyond the point is a small island. '1100 people are buried there,' Joan says. 'It may seem a lot, but it could hold 2500,' she continues. 'The low end of the island was where the convicts were buried, and the higher you went up, the higher the class of the person.'

Apparently in the later years a gravedigger actually lived on this tiny island. He grew flowers but 'could not eat vegetables grown from that soil'. I like home-grown veggies, but I can see his point.

Our tour is over and on the way into the wharf we are encouraged to take photos and we do. For all that, it is still such a beautiful spot. And next to me I hear: 'How could a place of such beauty have such an awful story?'

Encouraged earlier to go on our own afternoon explore-as-you-please walk, we do. The asylum museum we find is a fund of stories.

One quarter of the convicts were Irish, refugees from the potato famines between 1798 and 1848. One such was John Morgan. At sixty he stole food to feed his wife and two sons. For this crime he was transported, never to see them again.

Imagine.

Also with the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 many soldiers were laid off. No pensions in those days. Having risked life and limb for King and Country to think some ended up in prison in Van Diemen's Land!

Most prisoners were uneducated labourers. Those from rural areas were taller and stronger; factory workers were stunted by their long hours without light. A Robert Mason broke some machinery which he blamed for taking food out of children's mouths and 'because we advocated the cause of him who lived in a kind of plenty, yet never knew what it was to have enough'.

Such power and pathos in his words.

Oh, turning a corner, there is Bentham's pithy quote again: 'a mill to grind rogues honest'. But, I ask, from what I am reading, what if the real rogues are on the outside?

And then I discover what I think is a more definitive quote of Port Arthur by Austin Bidwell, a prisoner in the more lenient 1870s: 'An English prison is a vast machine – move with it and all is well. Resist and you will be crushed.'

Wandering back from the museum we stumble across prisoner William O'Brien's house. *House?* A convict with his own house? But O'Brien was unusual. As an MP for Ireland he had led a failed uprising. Transported for life, he finally accepted a ticket-of-leave from the prison on condition he not try to escape the colony. His parting assessment of Port Arthur? 'A spot which has probably witnessed more of human suffering than almost any spot of equal size on the globe.'

Rebellions around the Empire were afoot then. One was the Chartist movement who, in May 1838, a month before the Myall Creek massacre, put forward the seditious proposal that all men over twenty-one be given the vote – and by secret ballot! A number of their members were at Port Arthur also.

Time to leave. Port Arthur poses three parting questions for its visitors to ponder:

'Were convicts evil brutes, tragic victims of poverty and oppression, or heroes of the class struggle?'

'Were administrators brutal sadists or well-intentioned if mistaken philanthropists?'

'Is Port Arthur a sight of Gothic Horror or pastoral beauty and tranquility?'

I add three of my own:

Wasn't Myall Creek – bang in the middle of the area now known as New England – just a recreating of 'Old' England in the end, however different the plants and animals?

Wasn't the brutal massacre of Palawa, and at Myall Creek and across Australia, only an extension of something essential already massacred in the spirit and soul of England?

Weren't the institutions of prison only the Empire in microcosm, where any out-of-the-box thinking was to be feared, with zero tolerance?

We farewell the site, sobered yet also somehow sad to leave. It has taught us so much of the 1838 world. I do a discreet wave, and imagine them all – convicts, commandants, the massacred, tour guides and tourists – giving a discreet wave back.

We are all related after all.

17

'Thank you for taking the time to share our story'

Suddenly someone flashes his headlights. I check my speed. And sure enough, there he is, hiding with his speed camera. I smile and thank my fellow convict for this little act of subversion.

We convicts need to stick together.

Up late, we are heading back to Hobart. We are going to the Hobart museum, which tells the story of the Palawa, the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Given my research and what we have just left at Port Arthur, I am not hopeful of any surprise happy discoveries.

It occurs to me as I drive back through that unbeatable scenery (with all its peninsulas and isthmuses a great drive to teach your kids geography – and spelling), how astonishing that Port Arthur prison was built on good intentions.

I think of the one man who arguably oversaw the most Palawa deaths: the missionary Robinson. Sincere in his good intentions (initially at least), he enticed Palawa into his camps to both protect and civilise them – and watch them die – repeating what palpably didn't work by taking the few survivors away from their connection to land to Flinders Island, where again most died.

My mother used to say that, that you can kill with 'kindness', that superior and compulsively blind I-know-what-is-best-for-you attitude. And yet isn't that exactly the attitude we too often find today in all our 'caring' institutions (and behind our current Australian

Government 'Intervention' into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory – and with the same awful fallout)?

And for all this Robinson was handsomely rewarded and retired to England a rich man.

What was that definition of insanity?

You know, something like, 'insanity is to keep repeating what never did work, and each time expecting a different result'. My father told me that. He had heard it in one of his AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings.

The museum!

We have chosen well. Sunday has very little traffic, parking is a breeze, and the museum is *free*.

The very first exhibit is 'The First Australians'. This must be an attitude sea-change as I know it was not that long ago that Aboriginal people here were specimens to be investigated, not people to be met. Designed by Aboriginal people, it begins with an invitation:

'Walk in our shoes, look through our eyes, and journey alongside us'.

Such an incredibly generous invitation and, as at Port Arthur, I pledge myself to try.

I told you, didn't I, that I did not expect any happy discoveries in this museum? Well, I am wrong (it does happen). The Palawa story and spirit did not die with Truganini. Truganini it seems had no children, but others did.

But it was a close thing.

Palawa today as I understand it descend from three groups – women captured by white sealers, their descendants living on Cape Barren Island; from Dalrymple (Dolly) Johnson who was born in the islands and who later lived on the North West coast; and from

Fanny Cochrane Smith, you remember, Debra Hocking's ancestor.

Would you like to meet them, to walk a few minutes in their shoes?

I recognise Fanny, and imagine holding out my hand and being surprised and humbled she would give me a hug instead, thanking me for taking the time to share her story and to hear her sing. I recognize her because of a film recording of her singing in language in 1899, for Tasmanian languages the first and last time that was to happen.

Fanny was born in 1834 at Wybalenna on Flinders Island, north of Cape Barren Island. Her mother was Tanganuturra, her father unknown. Removed (stolen) at seven to live in homes and institutions, at twelve she went to the Queen's Orphan School in Hobart to learn domestic service skills under 'prison-like discipline'. She later lived in squalor in the Flinders Island home of Church of England catechist Robert Clark.

In 1847 with those forty-six other survivors of the Aboriginal 'experiment' at Wybalenna, she went to Oyster Cove, south of Hobart. In 1854 in Hobart she married ex-convict William Smith, transported for the heinous crime of stealing a donkey.

Her people – including her own mother, and Truganini, and William Lanney – regularly visited her. I am comforted by that thought. But again what was it like for Fanny to see them all die, her brother in 1857, William Lanney in 1868, Truganini in 1876, until Fanny was the last remaining full-blood.

She alone from that Oyster Bay community had children – eleven! In 1889 the government finally gave her land where she continued to hunt, gather bush foods

and medicines, make baskets, dive for shellfish and observe traditional practices until her death in 1905.

Given her Flinders Island experience, I am surprised Fanny and her husband became devout Methodists. And given her overwhelming losses as a person and as a Palawa, was it Jesus' own completely unjust and cruel death, and her faith in his rising from the dead and one day restoring all that was lost, that gave her the courage as one proud of her culture and identity to front European society with forgiveness and confidence and wit – because she did just that.

But of course. Who gave Debra Hocking, her great great granddaughter, her life inspiration to persevere and forgive but Fanny, Fanny who went through such similar and awful abuse to Debra, even if Fanny was born in 1834 and Debra in 1959 … *1959*.

If we were into patron saints in Australia, Fanny for me would have to be the one. An Aboriginal Methodist patron saint – imagine. I mean, would the Church ever recover?

Next I meet Dolly Dalrymple Johnson. I recognize her from her photos. Seeing her with Fanny, I am right there with them, a visitor come to hear their story.

Born in 1812, her mother was Worrete-moete-yenner, daughter of Mannarlargenna, a Plangermaireener clan elder (and I am struck that Tasmanian Aboriginal languages seem quite different to the mainland). Sold by her white father, George Briggs (her mother was his sex slave), Dolly became a foster child of a surgeon, and was trained as a domestic.

Dolly married freed convict Thomas Johnson, bringing her mother to be with them. And again I am heartened by that thought. Eventually moving to Latrobe in Victoria, they became successful large landowners.

Descendants of their ten children still live today in the north-west of Tasmania.

I am so inspired by her story. Why weren't we told of these incredible achievements against all the odds? As someone has written, 'her life story was very uncommon for an Aboriginal woman in the early nineteenth century'.

But wait. We have yet to meet the Cape Barren Island Aboriginal community, descendants of Aboriginal women stolen by sealers.

Despite conflict with authorities and missionaries sent to, yes, civilise them, they maintained their community, continuing traditional hunting rather than formal farming. From the 1850s they fought for return of land and control of the mutton-bird rookeries, resulting finally in the Cape Barren Island Reserve Act in 1912.

In World War I – incredibly – Cape Barren had the highest enlistment rate of *any* community in Australia. Of 27 eligible to enlist, 21 did so, many of their children fighting again in World War II.

So what was our thanks?

We closed their reserve in 1951. Some determinedly stayed on, some were forcibly removed, some voluntarily left to live in poverty in Tasmanian cities. Many who stayed had their children stolen by welfare authorities in the 1950s and 1960s. As one Aboriginal person reflected, 'We were never defeated, but we could not win.'

Today however it seems like a renaissance is taking place.

The museum display re-creates an impression of life before invasion, but the real focus is on Aboriginal people today reviving and recovering their past culture and skills, even if forced to do so through the

descriptions of early white explorers, or the writings of missionary Robinson himself.

My surprise is how much culture and community has survived: stringing seashells, mutton birding, spiritual beliefs and songlines, taboos, maintaining kinship lines and obligations, knowledge of bush foods and medicine, ocean navigation, reading the seasons and forecasting weather patterns.

Not to mention ceremonial activities and dance, and land management practices.

And language projects. There is a reconstructed Tasmanian language, Palawa kani. I never suspected that! It is, I read, a compilation of surviving pieces from several original Palawa languages.

Well, imagine if all Tasmanians learnt Palawa kani at school. Imagine if all Australians learnt enough of an Aboriginal language to begin to enter their world.

Anyway, you get the picture.

In recent decades Tasmanian Aboriginal organisations have been set up to fund services – and I wonder who finally hit upon that, the novel idea that Aboriginal people might know what is best for their own communities. And then there has been the return of sacred sites, including those places of past trauma – Oyster Bay, the first massacre site of Risdon Bay, and Wybalenna – to become places of remembrance and healing instead.

Exactly what the Myall Creek Memorial is about.

Making our way out, I pause beside a Tasmanian bark canoe, similar to an Egyptian papyrus boat, with long strips of bark bound tightly together, used in protected waters for fishing. The first made in such a long time, a young Aboriginal man on video talks of how in making it, he was making connection with his ancestors.

Next door is another video showing women threading seashell necklaces, the elders working with the younger women.

And then at the exit is a final word of utterly undeserved and incomprehensible grace from our hosts here, the Palawa speaking to us:

'We thank you for taking the time to share our story.'

On the way to Hobart airport we manage a quick visit to an 1830s restored grand home complete with shutters 'to keep out marauding Aborigines'. To think it almost became a service station. On the way out we talk with the curator about the massacre at Port Arthur cafe. Silence, and then:

'That was the day we lost our innocence.'

What could I say, given all that we had just learned, that it was less a loss of innocence as of unreality. But she appeared shaken, so I said nothing.

Last night on television a Palawa, a photographer, made the observation that the mid-1800s pictures of his people were all about capturing the last specimens of a dying race. His work however demonstrates there was never that danger.

And I thought of that Aboriginal saying: 'This is Aboriginal land, always was, always will be'.

Yes, but then where do I fit in?

And then I remembered when Aunty Sue and Uncle Lyall hugged the descendants of the murderers, Beulah and Des, in 2000 at the Myall Creek Memorial. In that hug she embraced all of us, my very own …

'Welcome to country.'

2007

Myall Creek …
Finding the faces

18

The courthouse

February 2007

A new year and here I am on a Sydney bus. For some time I have been wanting to check out the courthouse in central Sydney where the Myall Creek trial took place, and indeed had tracked the address down, but never got round to going. Tasmania, I guess, has inspired me to act.

On the way I pass by Gladesville hospital. Last week I took a tour as it has buildings dating back to 1838. Built, believe it or not, on Bedlam Bay, it was a 'lunatic asylum', our first effort to institutionalise those who had fallen through the cracks. The NSW Government entry notice tells us 1200 are buried in the grounds, most in unmarked graves, and that reform of attitudes to the mentally ill only happened in the 1980s – the *1980s*.

It also comments we need to learn the lessons and respect all our vulnerable in society. And I wonder as we pass by if anyone has made the 1838 connection between this place and Myall Creek, that there was something very seriously amiss.

The bus is meant to take twenty minutes – and it does! I soon discover I have walked past the courthouse many times before, not ever knowing what it was. It is built in our very early colonial brick style, together with the next-door St James church and The Barracks across the road where male convicts newly arrived were housed (today a

hi-tech museum visualising convict society and its impact on Aboriginal people, including at Myall Creek).

All designed by Francis Greenway, a convict convicted for forgery. And how lucky we were to get him. No doubt there were others like him, for whom transportation changed their lives for the better, given sunshine and an opportunity.

Reminiscent of Tasmania, this even earlier colonial architecture has such charm. What a loss that from the 1880s we became so slavishly Victorian, abandoning our wide verandahs – all very ironic, as the 1880s were the lead-in to our becoming independent as a nation in 1901. To become an independent nation meant being like respectable Victorian England! Which was also no doubt why from the 1880s we also began burying our massacre history – even as the massacres continued.

But guess what? The courthouse is still a courthouse. Built in the 1820s, it is being restored. Together with the church next door, they must be among the very few of this vintage in Australia still used for their original purpose.

There is no reception. It is a public building so I wander up the grand staircase. Having cased the whole building I bump, finally, into a security guard. Resisting the urge to ask if I can be of help, I ask instead if I can view a court, and very helpfully he knocks on a door, speaks to another guard, and I am let in to a live trial.

Is this the very same 1838 trial room, I wonder? As an observer I feel somewhat intimidated and I am not even in the dock. On my left are the seats for the jury. I am at the back. On the right are the accused and the police. Immediately in front are the barristers, and there up on high, framed by ornate woodwork with even a canopy, is his worship, the judge.

The room is quite small. Each window however is large with a semi-circular top, letting in abundant light. I turn around and on the back wall is a portrait gallery of Australia's Chief Justices. It includes the Myall Creek period James Dowling, looking impressive, dressed in all his red, white and black finery, very appropriate colours given the nature of the trial. I say hello but he ignores me. Legal people are like that.

So here we all are. November 1838. In front of me are three defence lawyers, together with Mr. Robert Scott, who raised money for the defence. Across the aisle is the prosecution led by the first Roman Catholic Attorney-General, John Plunkett.

Suddenly the convicts come in. The charges are read out. Overseers Foster and William Hobbs, and policeman Denny Day, all give evidence. From what I can pick up, because Aboriginal evidence is disallowed it means the eye witnesses of the actual massacre, the brothers Billy and Davey, are not in court. As such there is no conclusive identification of particular bodies, only some burned bone fragments.

The defence amaze me. They have none! Only some character comments by Myall Creek station owner Henry Dangar. He damns Anderson, the convict who dared to say no to the gang, then praises Kilmeister, the one who joined them. No surprises there.

Judge Dowling then gets up and basically tells the jury – no body, no proof. They must have listened well. I have barely had time to read my newspaper, barely fifteen minutes, and here they are back.

'Not guilty.'

And now around me there is great hearty cheering, as if some great justice has just been done.

Or is it me who is crazy?

Plunkett then turns to Dowling, asking the prisoners be retained as he wishes to prepare another indictment. Now there is hissing around me, as if from a snake-pit. Fearing for my life, I escape into sunlight and sanity.

Monday, November 26th, 1838

Well, here we all are again, except for Dowling who has been replaced by Judge Burton. Oh, and there are only seven in the dock this time. And someone whispers in my ear they are hoping the other four will rat on the rest. Given the stick-by-your-mates convict culture, I reckon that is a forlorn hope.

I have been reading the news with interest. There seems in some papers to be a revulsion at the killings. Others, like the Sydney Herald, are predictable.

There is a new charge this time. From what I can make out it is about whether a child, Charley, was killed. They swear in the jury who decide that this is indeed a new charge, and that's it for the day.

Thursday, November 29th

Back again, only with a new jury. My head spins, but at last we do get underway.

Overseer Hobbs' friend Foster seems ill-at-ease. Is it with his conscience, for he now cannot remember seeing any children's bones at the massacre site! I can see why he can't remember as I look at all the powerful interests in the room. Hobbs however contradicts him and, diplomatically, says Foster did not get as close as him.

Then bedlam. A man has come right into the court and tries to arrest Hobbs for not paying a debt. He is fined for contempt of court. Now who was behind that?

Police Inspector Denny Day repeats what he said at the first trial. Anderson then says he can't be absolutely

sure the boy, Charley, didn't escape. There is a groan from defence. Dangar again makes out Kilmeister is an angel. Attorney General Plunkett however takes Dangar down a peg. Apparently Dangar has himself been suspended from public office. I enjoy this, I must admit.

The prosecution's final witness is discredited when they find out he only goes up north twice a year.

Judge Burton then gets up.

He scolds Dangar. As the property owner it is his responsibility to make sure arms are used only in 'extreme provocation', and in this case the Aboriginal people were completely peaceful.

The jury goes out.

We wait forty-five minutes before they come back in. They all sit down, and then the foreman gets up.

'Not guilty.'

But then, just as we are all still taking this in, before the cheering can again erupt, another juror jumps up. He says there has been an error! They have been found guilty of the murder of *another* Aboriginal child.

The jury acknowledge this is indeed the case.

Stunned silence.

The Judge then speaks. He compliments Hobbs (what about Anderson?), says the seven are to be executed (but what about the other four?) And now the seven look lost, bewildered as if this outcome was incomprehensible in such a modern day and age. And yet in a momentary compassion I ask myself, was it only them on trial, that they alone carry all the guilt and pay the price?

I emerge again into the warm embracing sunlight, this time to have lunch on the benches outside the court. My wife has prepared some sandwiches, and I muse, looking at the now ceaseless traffic and soaring skyscrapers, how very close this past really is. The seven were executed,

hung, at 9am, December 18th, 1838. A week before Christmas.

I take the opportunity, being in the city, to go up to the State Library. I look again at the 1838 newspapers, and come across this conversation in the Gazette and the Monitor, overheard just after the trial:

'Well, have they hung these men this morning?' asked the gentleman from the country.

'Yes I understand they have,' his city friend replied.

'It is a damned shame; but we have fallen on a safer game in our part of the country.'

'Indeed? Pray, what is it?' the city gentleman asked.

'Oh, we poison them.'

'Good God! Poison them?'

'Yes, we have done so to a good many already, and serves them right, too.'

On 14th February 1839 the Prosecution withdrew its charges against the remaining four, citing lack of admissible evidence. Strange, since it was the same evidence that convicted the other seven. As if uneasy with all this legalese, Chief Justice Dowling then said if they were not brought to justice, 'there was still that small voice which would without fail admonish them, and, if their conscience did accuse them', he hoped they 'would repent and atone to God for any part they might have taken in the bloody affray with which they had been charged.'

Not content, I ferret out further reflections. Governor Gipps later wrote, 'After condemnation, none of the seven attempted to deny their crime, though they all stated that they thought it extremely hard that white men should be put to death for killing Blacks. Until after their

first trial, they never I believe thought that their lives were even in jeopardy.'

Trial prosecutor, Roger Therry, said in his *Reminiscences*: 'It may be said justice was not fully satisfied; if so, it was because it did not overtake some delinquents of a higher class than those who suffered, to whom the clearing of the land of the blacks after this fashion, the prisoners believed, would be very acceptable.'

I want to avoid the peak-hour. I register in hurrying for the bus, how I am now suddenly noticing history – a statue of the Governor before Gipps, one Richard Bourke, and then just down the road I find a monument to the first ever sermon preached in New South Wales!

How could I have missed them for so long?

Together, I fear, with the roses.

19

Faces from the past

March 2007

After Tasmania I find I am gaining a sympathy, if not empathy, for the convicts. So I guess that means I am now ready to find the faces behind the Myall Creek story.

Apart from Fleming, the gang leader, all the others in the gang were either still convicts or 'ticket-of-leavers', those with freedom to work within a given district until their sentence ended, or until they were pardoned. Convicts earned no wages and had no rights, the lowest of the British low.

All bar one were in their twenties. Only John Blake was married. A freckled-faced Irish stockman, from Glennie's Gileroi station, he had (once had) three children.

Next, meet George Telluse. Same place and job description as Blake, he was given a life sentence in England for housebreaking. A life sentence just for that!

And suddenly I now imagine them all in a line, as if waiting to be introduced.

Next is Edward Foley.

They are all quite short, but of course they were shorter then. I am always struck when aboard ship replicas of that era how small the doors and beds are. Having said that Foley, also Irish, is taller, about my height, a stockman from Fleming's property.

Next in line is William Hawkins. Thickset, a ticket-of-leaver, he is head stockman from Noogera Creek station.

And how very odd that a station or 'run' should have an *Aboriginal* name.

And here is James Oates – another freckled-faced Irishman, with tattoos on his arm. He is a stockman from Hall's property, and imaginatively known as 'Hall's Jemmy'.

Lots of Irish. And I wonder, having so suffered under the British, when was it that they lost the connection and became agents of inflicting their suffering onto others?

Next, another James. James Parry is a convict hut-keeper at Eaton's Biniguy station – like fellow Myall Creek hutkeeper Anderson. And like Anderson, all of twenty-two.

And then meet another James! James Lamb is head stockman from Cobb's middle station.

But wait, we have a few more to go.

Here is George Palliser, stocky, also with tattooed arms. George's face is scarred by smallpox, set off by a broken nose. He is a stockman at Bell's station.

Then the oldest, an ancient 33, is John Russell. John is a ticket-of-leave overseer, also at Bell's. Again Irish, he too has that pockmarked face, plus a back scarred from the lash.

And then, Kilmeister. I move on.

I emerge shaken. *So* young, hearts already honed hard by the life trauma etched into their faces, no doubt all abandoned and rejected spirits, something Mother England seemed to specialise in.

I look back down the line. Hang on.

Where is the gang's leader, the squatter's son, Fleming?

Of course, on the run again. And I imagine Fleming's father urging him on with this hunting expedition to clear the land, to make a man of him. Fleming's property, Mungie Bundie station, is furthest west of those station

owners involved in the Myall Creek story – all of whom would no doubt have been only too willing to hide him away.

But wait. One convict is missing.

Ah, there he is, standing aloof. And no wonder. Be prepared for a shock.

John Johnstone is *black*.

At Myall Creek black must have killed black. And into my mind comes the Native Police, Aboriginal men from other areas who, under white training and command, in uniform tracked down and massacred without mercy their black brothers and sisters.

Johnstone's face is badly scarred. Known as 'Black Johnstone', he is from the then slaving capital of the world, Liverpool, where between 1783 and 1793 alone over 300,000 thousand slaves were shipped to the Americas. Knowing that, I am no longer so surprised, either at his colour or of the passed-on brutality so clearly done to him. Just as convicts were non-people, so they could likewise treat Aboriginal people as non-people, the only ones on a yet lower societal peg than themselves.

Having met these men, the convict hut-keeper Anderson stands out as all the more impressive. Wasn't he also an abused soul (Myall Creek station owner, Henry Dangar, not long before the massacre inflicted *one hundred* lashes on Anderson for 'failing in his duty')? Didn't he have the same peer pressures to join in? A bit of a loner (not unlike me), he could not ride a horse for the life of him (also my own experience). But in that moment he refused to participate.

And later refused to be silent.

I find this a personally consoling thought. I would like to think, even under that pressing mob pressure, I like

him would have said no before getting on my horse and wielding my cutlass.

Of course at Myall Creek there were other vital links in the sequence that uniquely led to justice: William Hobbs, the overseer, who exposed the massacre; landholder Frederick Foot who on horseback took the report all the way to Sydney; Governor Gipps who after only four months in the colony was determined justice be done, together with Attorney General Plunket who ordered the retrial; and not to forget policeman Denny Day who from July through August meticulously gathered up the suspects and the evidence. This stuff of movies continued right through to when that brave juror got up to say there had been an error.

The conscience of our nation rested on these few!

Bright stars they were, shining all the brighter because of the dark forces determined that light *not* shine – men like Dangar. It was Dangar who helped organise the gang's defence. And it was Dangar who in October 1838 went to Myall Creek to sack Hobbs (for telling the truth).

But it was not only Dangar. Prominent landholder and magistrate Robert Scott visited the accused, assuring them of financing their day in court, and urging them not to break ranks. There were many others, a mafia of the well-connected.

Denial is like that.

In this one case however the combined courage of those who spoke up was unstoppable. Their individual lights came together in such an extraordinary way, linking Governor all the long way down to convict.

Sadly after the trial that linking of lights fragmented. The darkness closed in again engulfing, even if not ever quite extinguishing, that light, really for the next hundred years … and then some.

2008

Sacred Circles

20

Sorry

I just saw 'Sorry' on television. Not the sorry we saw in 2000 emblazoned across the sky that day when we walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. This is a new sorry, said in a new place, in our national Parliament, the government – supported, in the main, by the Opposition – apologising on behalf of the whole nation to the stolen generations, to people like Debra.

Apparently even as it was unfolding most of us still did not really want to say sorry, but then changed our minds. Seeing the actual people affected as the apology was read, seeing the emotional impact on those interviewed all around the nation – it was just too deep to deny.

The new PM, Kevin Rudd, said it himself, on behalf of all of us:

'To the stolen generations, I say the following: as Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Parliament of Australia, I am sorry. I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and suffering that we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments.

'I know that, in offering this apology on behalf of the Government and the Parliament, there is nothing I can

say today that can take away the pain you have suffered personally. Whatever words I speak today, I cannot undo that. Words alone are not that powerful; grief is a very personal thing.

'I ask those non-indigenous Australians listening today who may not fully understand why what we are doing is so important to imagine for a moment that this had happened to you. I say to honourable members here present: imagine if this had happened to us. Imagine the crippling effect. Imagine how hard it would be to forgive.

'My proposal is this: if the apology we extend today is accepted in the spirit of reconciliation, in which it is offered, we can today resolve together that there be a new beginning for Australia.'

Others may have said it before, but not here, not in our national Parliament, not on behalf of the nation.

As the PM put it, aren't we indeed, 'wrestling with our own soul. This is not, as some would argue, a black-armband view of history; it is just the truth: the cold, confronting, uncomfortable truth – facing it, dealing with it, moving on from it. Until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people. It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together.'

A powerful, powerful apology to the 'Stolen Generations'.

But no mention of the massacres, of Myall Creek. No mention of the *hundreds* of Myall Creeks in our history. No mention of the blood going into the ground.

And then I think of all that red earth we have all over Australia … but at least, at last, a sorry has been said.

21

Bennelong

Enter Bennelong. Didn't even knock. And blow me down he has brought a friend. I don't respond to unexpected callers, but anyway I invite them in.

Not that I had much choice. I am just home from a day seminar on Bennelong organised, not inappropriately, by Bennelong Residents for Reconciliation of whom I am one (yet another by-product of Myall Creek). Well over a hundred came. So just maybe it is time for me to get to know this outstanding man.

Bennelong was the one who in 1792, in his late twenties and only four years after the First Fleet, went willingly to England to check out where all these weird whites came from. He went with his young friend with that unpronounceable name Yemmerrwanne (you think you can? – go on, have a try).

Well, how brave they were. I am just staggered by the sheer scope of the physical and spiritual scenery these young men experienced. From traditional tribal life to London, the centre of the then largest empire on earth!

Bennelong is buried just down the road from where I grew up and now live. Our electorate, named after him, is the electorate of our Prime Minister before Rudd, losing not only government, but his own seat, the seat of Bennelong.

Bennelong was originally kidnapped by Governor Phillip, of course with the best of intentions. He was to learn English and act as a go-between – which in the end he did. He was not the first experiment. His predecessor

Aranbanoo died (so unfairly) from smallpox, caught from caring for two children who had the disease.

Bennelong escaped, his slack guard given one hundred lashes for 'failing in his duty.' Eventually enticed back, Bennelong adopted oh-so-English dress, frilled collars and all, a style not unlike our own frilled lizards, and with similar effect.

He with Yemmerrwanne then went to the motherland and – no small thing – met the King, and even had servants to look after them (imagine!) They stayed in Mayfair no less, went to shows and were tutored in English. They even gave a recital which was recorded, Australia's (our) oldest published music.

Yemmerrwanne died on May 18th 1794 aged only 19, and was buried in England. Some put it down to the weather (I can understand that). Or was it really homesickness? It seems Bennelong's subsequent loneliness and his own deteriorating health forced his return after two years or so away.

And I have to intrude here with the observation that it seemed that was the enduring effect on Aboriginal peoples when meeting 'civilisation': they got sick.

Well, on return you would think having been feted with all that attention and experiencing all those benefits of the world's mightiest Empire, Bennelong would come back extolling its virtues. He did live back in European society for a while but, no doubt patronised, went back amongst his own, seemingly turning his back on all he had seen.

At this point most histories write him off as a drunkard, a bitter disappointment, indicative of a race who just didn't get it – and I hear in my mind past teachers saying things like that to me:

'When *will* you get it, Cordiner?'

'Get what, sir?'

'When *will* you get it?' reminds me of A. O. Neville. As chief protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, in 1937 he asked: 'Are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any Aborigines in Australia?'

Neville had this grand idea of how to avoid the creation of a 'third race', breeding out, in his words, all black characteristics.

In the internationally-acclaimed hauntingly beautiful yet tragically true film Rabbit Proof Fence, three 'coloured' girls were taken from their families in northern Western Australia, black mothers being deemed unfit to mother their children with white blood. And then put in an institution some *2,500* kilometres away to the south.

Neville is distressed when Molly and her sister and cousin, aged 14, 8 and 10, escape and despite being tracked by an Aboriginal tracker, *walk* home – one of the truly epic inland desert journeys of Australian history, more than matching any white explorer! (But you won't find it in the 'Explorers of Australia' history books.)

Neville's response?

'When *will* they understand what we are trying to do for them?'

And Neville was totally sincere. And of course they did understand, all too well. Molly when she got home cleverly disappeared into really remote desert country. So Neville bided his time. When Molly married and had children, he removed them instead. Molly went down and managed to escape with them *a second time*. This only made their 'chief protector' more determined. Her two daughters were retaken, this time never to be returned.

One daughter, Doris, as a mature woman herself, finally met up with her aged mother; the other sister, never.

But if Neville succeeded he also failed. Molly's spirit was not broken, despite all that help, all that protection. What an extraordinary, extraordinary woman, Molly.

I have digressed. Again.

They said Bennelong now belonged in neither place, white nor black, and maybe in a sense he didn't. Maybe this world was too small for him. Just maybe in the end this courageous man was left longing for that better country, or was it in seeing the awesome might and power of this peculiar people, even meeting the King, behind all the glitz and glamour, the religion and rum, however hard he tried, he found it in the end ... hollow.

So even having lived here for so long, I am seeing my own suburb of cosmopolitan Sydney through new eyes – yes, as if for the very first time.

Written on the door of our house is 'Wallumetta'. It is the name of the local clan. Incredible to think even in this city of oldest European occupation, right where we now live, Aboriginal feet walked this way through my backyard so recently – at least up to the 1830s. Likely much later – my place was virgin bush until 1926.

Home of the Wallumetta people, Bennelong's burial place …

My country.

22

Australia's Ground Zero

This week I met Cecil. Cecil is Aboriginal, with a shock of longish frizzed white hair and a face that reminds me of Albert Einstein. But at that point any similarity of story and of opportunity ends.

I met him at a public meeting. He is from Cowra, a small New South Wales country town. He was one of those removed, literally taken from his mother's arms. He was vulnerable, you see, to being taken away as his dad was not there. Dad was away fighting for King and country.

And so Cecil was removed, taken away as a baby to his first of many institutions.

His first one was not that bad, he says, because he had no memory of any other sort of life. He was told his parents were dead. His father, who had survived one war, came back to another, fighting unsuccessfully to get Cecil and his other children back.

Cecil said it was when he was taken to Kinchella Boys' Home that it all changed. A footprint was found in some recently laid concrete. No-one owned up so the manager tested each boy's foot in the cast. Cecil was punished over an extended period, until out of the blue the message came that he could go back to normal duties. Later he learnt it was the manager's son who had done such a terrible deed.

Cecil said such experiences deeply scarred him. He was good at fighting, and fight he did, spending the next nearly thirty years in his next institution – gaol.

His daughter, sitting next to him, had her head bowed throughout his talk. She then rose and spoke of what it

was like to grow up with an angry father, with alcohol, with his extended absences in prison.

The meeting over, I made straight for Cecil and his daughter. They were standing to one side, as if they didn't quite belong. I so wanted to thank them for what they had shared. I told them just that, then went automatically to shake their hands, the daughter's first.

No hand. She told me she doesn't shake hands.

And I understood.

Cecil said he didn't mind, and then gave me a vigorous handshake, still strong for an older man.

But what has also prompted writing this chapter is a movie I saw last night. Pocahontas was the daughter of a Native American chief, growing up during first contact with whites in the early 1600s. Her story had all the elements of Fanny Cochrane Smith – the loss of so many of her people, marrying a white man, her forgiving faith, her astounding kindness.

Then, like Yemmerrwanne (for whom I have felt a special identification since meeting him), she went to England with her husband and young son and she too met and enchanted the King. And then just as they were to return home, like Yemmerrwanne, she fell ill and died. She was just twenty-two. She was buried at Gravesend outside London (the same name as a town just north of Myall Creek, incredibly, site of yet another massacre).

The film engaged shut-down convict me at a deep level with the raw pain of all these stories – Fanny, her great granddaughter Debra, Bennelong, Cecil and his daughter … story after story after story. Suddenly it all reached into me, gripped me, the awful loss, my own losses as well.

Prime Minister Rudd had expressed something of what I was feeling:

'There is something terribly primal about these firsthand accounts. The pain is searing; it screams from the pages. The hurt, the humiliation, the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children is a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity.'

How can the human heart ever fully recover from such deep and profound grief?

And I reckon perhaps this emotional connection needs to be made for all who come this way of Myall Creek, as we are ready, as we all must in the end, however long we delay the meeting.

Australia's own ground zero.

But wait. Oddly, today is Good Friday.

I immediately think of Rev. Martin Luther King in his campaign for equal rights in the U.S. It was his experience that when life was at its darkest, a light always broke through. A way forward somehow always opened up. As he put it, today is Friday but Sunday is coming.

Or in the words of another African American, poet and activist Maya Angelou: 'History despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.'

And then into my mind come the words …

Bury my heart at Myall Creek,
An Australian identity, my own, I seek,
Looking into my nation's past,
I come face to face with myself at last.

Bury my heart at Myall Creek,
Bury my heart at Myall Creek,
Being broken, being made whole

Journeying into my nation's soul.

Walking amongst the dead and slain,
Filled with the pain all over again,
I weep for myself, I weep for them,
For all we have lost, covered with shame.

A nation invaded, never even knew,
Never wanted to know they were people too,
Took away their culture, took away their lives,
Gave them instead our alcohol and lies.

Our future lies waiting within us all,
Our history, our legacy, our nation's soul,
We have to own it, make it our own,
For all of us this is our only home.

Australia, how I love you, this wide brown land,
You show the mark of the Creator's hand.
Show us the way through our guilt and shame,
Give us, this land, a brand new name.

Find my heart at Myall Creek,
Find my heart at Myall Creek,
Being broken, being made whole,
We re-find at last our nation's soul …

23

Paul Keating

Wait a minute! About the way through our guilt and shame – the way *has* already been shown, hasn't it? True, not in the parliament, but by a *serving* Prime Minister nonetheless – Paul Keating, to the Aboriginal community in Redfern Park, Sydney, on December 10th 1992, fully sixteen years before Kevin Rudd's apology.

His call was to recover our lost imaginations:

'This is perhaps the point of this Year of the World's Indigenous People: to bring the dispossessed out of the shadows, to recognise that they are part of us, and that we cannot give indigenous Australians up without giving up many of our own most deeply held values, much of our own identity – and our own humanity.

'Nowhere in the world, I would venture, is the message more stark than in Australia …

'We simply cannot sweep injustice aside … the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians.

'It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.

'It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds.

We failed to ask – how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us ...'

And I am amazed.

Aren't these my own journey conclusions?

I read on … 'it might help us if we non-Aboriginal Australians imagined ourselves dispossessed of land we have lived on for 50,000 years – and then imagined ourselves told that it had never been ours. Imagine if ours was the oldest culture in the world and we were told that it was worthless.

'Imagine if we had resisted this settlement, suffered and died in the defence of our land, and then were told we had given up without a fight. Imagine if non-Aboriginal Australians had served their country in peace and war and were then ignored in history books. Imagine if our feats on sporting fields had inspired admiration and patriotism and yet did nothing to diminish prejudice. Imagine if our spiritual life was denied and ridiculed.

'Imagine if we had suffered the injustice and then were blamed for it. It seems to me that if we can imagine the injustice then we can imagine its opposite …

'I think we are beginning to see how much we owe the indigenous Australians and how much we have lost by living so apart …

'There is one thing today we cannot imagine. We cannot imagine that the descendants of people whose genius and resilience maintained a culture here through 50,000 years or more, through cataclysmic changes to the climate and environment, and who then survived two centuries of dispossession and abuse, will be denied their place in the modern Australian nation.

'We cannot imagine that.'

24

Kangaroo!

We all turn to where Yayoi, our Japanese friend, is pointing. Sure enough there he is. Big one too, light browny-red, standing only about one hundred metres away. Just the one, which is a bit unusual, and I glimpse through my friend's excitement just what an extraordinary animal it really is, its upright stance, powerful back legs, long, long tail, its intelligent face, all put together in a way totally suited to confounding farmers as they jump with such ease and grace the fences criss-crossing the Australian landscape.

Yet how completely different and other to those more mundane animals from England.

Did, I wonder, the early settlers ever see the sheer beauty of this animal, and just stop and marvel as I observe my Japanese friend is doing? And suddenly I too feel like I am seeing a kangaroo for the very first time.

It is June 2008 – back up here again. We came up yesterday. It keeps drawing us back, Myall Creek.

Well, everyone has left. Except us, the five of us, Sallie, my 81-year-old mother Jean, Yayoi, and friend from Sydney, Marty. The sun is getting low on the horizon, that magic time of day, particularly now in this place. After the day's hectic events, in silence we have just re-walked the red memorial walk, re-read the plaques, paused at the rock, signed the visitors' book, breathed in deeply the crisp air. There is a sense of a just indefinable, tangible, peace.

What a day it has been.

You want to know about it? You do?

Here, sit on this marble seat. Not in a hurry I hope. Oh, good. Well, let me say sighting this kangaroo is strange, for today in amongst the explosion of young people who came – those dressed in school uniforms as part of the commemoration, those who came to get prizes for our schools art and essay competition, those who came to dance and sing, those who just came anyway – was this four year old Aboriginal dancer. Yes that's right, *four*. Well, he followed the others perfectly, and we all laughed with delight as we recognized the animals being mimicked. Then he did a kangaroo, and suddenly he *was* a kangaroo, and I turned to Yayoi.

'Kangaroo!' she shouted, pointing.

And now there is this one right here, standing right in front of us.

But let me start at the beginning. Might be an idea to rug up a bit though as it will quickly turn cold when the sun goes down. It is June after all.

First our book-team of five set up our table. It was all non-stop. Everything was selling. Then we were off on our kilometre walk up to the memorial on the hill, our annual mini-pilgrimage. I was among the last and walked with Renee, a descendant of Blake, one of the murderers.

I pointed out to her as we walked where I think the massacre site is, and then said how at nearby Waterloo Creek a far larger massacre took place, carried out by soldiers, that Myall Creek was not an isolated event, only part of a pattern. She was all smiles, so attentive. I admit I went on a bit. And then she said she teaches history.

Oh.

Then just over there – can you see it? – we had the smoking ceremony. I joined the last group walking the

memorial path, and someone said 'how could such an awful thing happen in a place as peaceful as this?'

The ceremony at the big rock was beginning as we stragglers finished our walk. We all started off by reading this – here, can you see, on the program:

'As we have walked along the path, we have recalled again the massacre that was perpetrated on the slopes below on the 10th of June 1838. We have recalled also that several of the perpetrators were brought to justice for this crime.'

Then as happens every year, the descendants of those killed and those who killed, came forward and faced each other. And someone called for Renee to join them. Then Renee, joining her group, said this bit here, 'We are the descendants of, and represent, all those who carried out the murder and mayhem on the slopes below.'

Then elders Aunty Elizabeth Connors, Aunty Sue Blacklock, Uncle Lyall Munro and the others responded: 'We are the descendants of those who survived the massacres.'

And after that they embraced. And we all watched on, right there with them. Then Aunty Sue embraced Renee.

And Renee wept.

I looked up into the sky. A breeze had sprung up and the sun just shimmered on the silvery grey-green leaves, and again I sensed that suspension of time and that all those of 1838 were suddenly with us again, all these years later, coming to be among us.

Well I asked the guy next to me did he sense their presence. He said nothing, only gave me this quizzical look, not unsympathetic but as if to say 'dream on'. Well I did, for here is surely a place of deep Dreaming.

As a teacher in Zimbabwe, I remember our deputy headmaster saying at assembly he was amazed the

Australian teachers didn't seem to believe in a spiritual world. Everyone smiled, as if sorry for these poor lost Western souls – like, when will they get it.

Sorry. Where were we? The ceremony?

Ah, yes. Well, then came the speaker, though for me it was not his words that spoke but Renee's response. She broke down again and, caught unawares, when he saw her he had to stop to compose himself.

The students who had read the plaques followed on next, the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal facing each other. The non-Aboriginal students said this bit here:

'We remember them. We also honour those who died all over the country, needlessly and in unprovoked violence; some, courageously defending their land, some because they spoke the truth in the face of violent aggression, and still others of a broken and despairing heart.'

The Aboriginal students responded:

'We honour all those good people who throughout our history have reached out to one another lending a hand in need, speaking a word of encouragement, or taking actions for justice.'

Stars in the darkness, I call them. Imagine it, this dialogue going back and forth. Again, the Aboriginal cry:

'We acknowledge that violence that has continued across the land for 200 years. The land was taken without negotiation or payment; laws and cultures and languages were destroyed; families were broken up and dispersed; many children were taken from their families. This destruction and evil continues to affect the lives of our people now, to cause confusion, fear, anger and violence.' Then the reply:

'We know that oppression continues in the present, in deaths in custody, in refusal of those in authority to listen

to Aboriginal people, in a one-sided blaming of Aboriginal people for the problems, in unequal opportunities to study, in a health care system that is failing many Aboriginal people, in a history still told largely from the perspective of non-Aboriginal people.'

And again the Aboriginal response:

'We do not want people to feel guilty about the past but we again invite you to join with us in a struggle for a fairer and more just society.'

There it was again, that incredible Tasmanian Museum Palawa invitation to walk with them awhile – after all that has happened. And suddenly we were finishing.

And all of us, hundreds of us, read together:

'We will continue our journey, searching our own hearts and reflecting on our own attitudes which alienate us from one another. Together we will work for a future in which we are all able to contribute our gifts to this nation. We will work to end the injustice and prejudice which continue to sideline Aboriginal people. We will learn and teach the paths of justice, respect and reconciliation so that we may walk together down this road.'

Then the bull-roarer indeed roared with that pulsating, eerie sound. And then it fell silent for another year.

Would you like to take a copy of the program home with you? Here. No, take it. I have a spare.

What happened after the ceremony?

Well, we had our afternoon celebrations and school competition prize-giving by Jo, one of our committee and the inspiration behind it, followed by Aboriginal dances and then the AGM. Oh, you know someone jumped the lunch queue to get me a sausage sandwich with barbeque sauce and fried onions (is this how

corruption starts?) and our little team sold more books and booklets at an even more busy rate.

So something is happening. You know what I think? I think we are only players in a much bigger story, bigger than all our committees or plans or even our best intentions. I remember elder Uncle Lyall saying that to me, that this site belonged to no one group, that it belonged now to the nation, to the whole world.

Anyway, really good to talk. I've enjoyed it. Where are you from? Really? You have come such a long way to get to this place. And such a long way still to travel.

Safe journey home.

I stiffly stand, realising it was yours truly doing all the talking (no wonder I enjoyed it so much), and as if signaling the end of our conversation, the kangaroo just ups and jumps down the hill. And we all watch him go.

We walk back to our car. Someone pulls up. It is Russell, one of the committee, a local. He tells me he is checking out where water is for the proposed Education and Cultural Centre. He is absorbed, intent, and like all of us, Myall Creek I see has ambushed him also. We talk a bit, but as the sun is all but gone, and the cool is turning to cold, I say goodbye, jump in the car where the others are already ensconced, and head off, leaving him a solitary silhouetted figure walking across the fields.

I turn left onto the main road until a chorus of voices shout 'wrong way!' Oh, right. Funny about that. I seem here to always lose my usually uncanny sense of direction (no, really). I chuck a U-turn, head back down the hill, past the now deserted community hall on the left, the formidable Victorian Myall Creek Station homestead on the right and make for our budget motel in Inverell - you know the one, in the centre of town. Next to the pub.

25

Completing the circle

Up at the crack of dawn we are packed and ready, for today we head for Armidale, home of my old university. I want to see again the café where that don't-you-hate-those-white-men conversation took place.

We did a short walk around Inverell before breakfast. Again the buildings look really attractive, with no advertising above awning level. And I notice the names of the hotels – Imperial, Empire, Oxford, Royal!

Then came breakfast as you would imagine for any well-planned day. One of our small party had gone out earlier and taken the chance to talk to a local, a friendly farming lady in town to see her husband in hospital. When he mentioned Myall Creek to her, the lady replied, 'And where is Myall Creek?'

Last night we looked for a restaurant, recoiled at the prices (all over ten dollars) and ended up at KFC. There were four Aboriginal boys, three mid-teens, one younger. They were all quite dark, which for some reason registered. Everyone ate inside as it was cold. When they finished and walked out, the youngest unselfconsciously gave the rubbish-bin lid a shove, then suddenly turned and looked at me as if he had just committed an awful crime.

I smiled at him with that 'it's OK' kind of smile.

What *is* their world?

After all this time, do I really understand more than I did when I looked at the faces of my Aboriginal students in Armidale all those University years ago?

And I recall Bob from our Sydney Friends of Myall Creek only days ago telling me how at Coffs Harbour Primary School he was persecuted by some teachers for being a minister's son, but that he knew the Aboriginal students were treated worse. He never forgot the cruelty against the only Aborigine in his 1953 Infants class 2B, a little girl on her own who was ignored in the rear corner behind the girls, except when she was used by the otherwise kindly teacher, a Mrs. Boardman, as the worst type of punishment for anyone to have to sit next to.

We say goodbye to Inverell. As we nose our car out to cross the road, not only does a car stop, but the driver waves! Country *is* a different world. And then, how very little I understand of that world either.

We go via Glen Innes, a bleak cold place in winter (that is now!), a region full of Scottish place names, and as we pass the highest caravan park in Australia (as if that is something you want to publicise) I wonder whether these original settlers were the same highland Scots cleared off their land for sheep. And if so, why didn't they connect with the plight of the Aboriginal people suffering the very same fate?

Perhaps some did.

It is not long before we descend to the much more English-sounding town of Armidale. Even if Armidale is off the real high country, the wind still has that cutting edge. There are changes of course. It is approaching fully four decades since I was at the university, but enough landmarks survive to find our way. We pull up outside the university administration building, the original homestead. Enormous for a home, it is not unlike the Myall Creek Station homestead, only bigger. It has a view back over the valley, now occupied by residential colleges.

It too has an Aboriginal name – Boolimbah.

After marvelling through the windows at the fine interior polished woodwork (which reminds me of the church at Port Arthur), we head off to find the cafeteria further up the hill. All the new buildings seem add-ons, as if each decade in our paradigm of progress deemed itself superior to the former.

And where has all the grass gone? Not to mention the flowers. There is so much more concrete now than when I was here, with a fountain which would go well in Tiananmen Square.

For a moment I am lost, but then make out the library, and beyond, the old student union buildings. They are the same, wooden and worse for wear, but I remember. And yes, here is the little courtyard and … the café!

I peer through the window (it is Sunday, and everything is closed). I can see exactly where Jo and I sat. I linger some minutes, picturing it all, recalling our conversation. I even retrace my steps after I left Jo that day, just to relive the original scene and setting.

And the university suddenly now seems so small.

I notice a sign pinned on the cafeteria notice board, dated this very morning. It quotes the university chancellor to the effect that delivering education is no different to any business. Oh, how far we have come in such a short time! But clearly the profits haven't reached the student union. A cold wind blows down the open-to-the-elements corridor, all the way from the highlands.

Time to go.

We have a way to go to reach Sydney. As I walk back to the car, I reflect that those university years, apart from some head knowledge, did not teach me that much.

But wait a minute. In my rush, is that all I feel?

I pause as the others head for the warmth of the car. If the university suddenly feels so small, not so my inner whisperings of some far deeper gratitude – for seeing that film *Little Big Man* that prompted the conversation in the café, for the tutoring of the Aboriginal children that marked the beginning of this story, the Aboriginal story of one very white Australian on his way to Myall Creek.

And I wonder in this year of our national 'sorry', of so many circles within circles, whether I may pass this way yet again, perhaps with my grandchildren, and see it all – my story and my nation's story – as if for the very first time. From that future higher hill of experience no doubt I will understand where I now stand is in reality still but a small hill.

And then I think too of Native American Black Elk, his broken circle of life. But this year at Myall Creek, it seems, is saying that circle can be restored, the sacred tree can be healed and bloom yet again – fulfilling Black Elk's desperate prayer as an old man on Harney Mountain: 'O make my people live!'

But it is far too cold for dwelling on such thoughts, even on such important thoughts. I jump in the car, turn up the heater, and we head for home, for Sydney via Walcha and, where else but in Australia, Thunderbolt's Way, named after a bushranger!

But not a bad bloke for all that.

2009

Edge of the world

26

What happened to them?

A full year later, June 2009, and next week we head up country again to Myall Creek. It will only take eight or so hours. Just up the road really.

But before we set off, you will probably want to know – what happened to the key people after the trials? Well, anyway, I'll fill you in.

Take the young squatter Fleming.

Well, Fleming as you know was never caught, and that despite a hefty £50 reward. By only 1840 Fleming had already very publicly married Charlotte Dunstan in the small country town of Wilberforce, close to Sydney. And there they remained. Later he became church warden and a pillar of society and, wait for it, a magistrate. In his church he installed a leadlight window, depicting the victory of good over evil.

Denial is like that.

They had no children. He died at 78 in 1894. According to the Windsor Richmond Gazette, 'The deceased used to tell some stirring stories of the early days of the colonies and the troubles he had with the blacks' (all the more poignant then that Barry, one of Fleming's indirect descendants, an unpretentious man with a massive white beard, is now also part of the ongoing Myall Creek story).

And what about Major James Winnifred Nunn, the man who led the soldiers on that campaign of slaughter starting with the massacre on January 26th, 1838, at Waterloo Creek? (January 26 – now Australia Day!)

There was an inquiry into Nunn's expedition but in July 1842 the newly set up governing body, the Executive Council – which included Governor Gipps – decided no action would be taken. Nunn after all was under orders of Acting Governor Lt. Colonel Kenneth Snodgrass to 'act according to your own judgement and use your utmost exertion to suppress the outrages of the blacks'. To put him on trial would be to put the whole colonial system on trial.

The four convicts who escaped hanging had their charges dropped – James Lamb (the one who had also been part of Nunn's campaign) only months later in February 1839. In August 1842 he was given his ticket-of-leave and in September 1846 his conditional pardon. Lamb was essentially a free man, but on condition that 'convicts did not return to England or Ireland' (what about Scotland?)

Charles Telluse's charges were dropped in July 1839. He got his ticket in March 1842, and six years later his conditional pardon. George Palliser's and John Blake's charges were dropped in February 1839. Palliser continued working at Bell's station. Blake got his ticket in July 1842 and pardon in July 1848. I know his descendant, Des Blake. Des goes into schools telling the story of Myall Creek.

John Blake later did himself in, cutting his throat. (This immediately takes me back to Zimbabwe to an ex-Selous Scout – a crack white unit of Smith's Rhodesian army. He taught in our all-black school, and was popular. I liked him too. He stayed in my house for a time. Then one day he tried to do himself in. Maybe in his students' black faces he found his past too confronting.)

Robert Scott, the magistrate who raised money for the gang's defence, sold his interests in the Herald

newspaper (no wonder its partisan reporting!) and was stripped of his magistrate status for interfering during the Myall Creek trial. He then focused on farming, developing a horse stud in the Hunter Valley.

He died in 1844, unmarried, at only 45.

But if Scott's life seemed to have been in some way adversely marked by Myall Creek, not so the ubiquitous Henry Dangar. By the early 1840s he had amassed a massive 125,000 hectares in northern NSW. In 1845 he was elected to the NSW Legislative Council. He retired to a mansion in Potts Point in Sydney, and died in 1861 aged 64. With all those streets in Armidale, Newcastle, and Sydney plus a waterfall and that island named after him – what more could you aspire to?

For Governor George Gipps, as the battles with squatters continued, his light seemed to go out. Recalled to England, he died in February 1848, only a few months after arriving home.

Policeman Denny Day was one of the few who in bringing Myall Creek to justice did not suffer any payback. In 1849 he became a police superintendent in Sydney, and later a stipendiary magistrate at Port Macquarie. In 1858 he went back to Maitland as the chief magistrate. He died in 1876. His descendant, Alyson, is part of Sydney Friends of Myall Creek.

What of William Hobbs, the Myall Creek overseer?

Hobbs was praised by the judge for his integrity in reporting the massacre, but it was the last praise he would receive. He had to sue Dangar for five months' salary. That was successful, but for ratting on the system he paid the penalty, at times being physically threatened. He could not get a job anywhere, despite an appeal to Gipps for a job as a chief constable, even with Denny Day and Attorney General Plunkett as referees.

In 1846 Hobbs appealed to the new governor and finally got the job of chief constable at Wollombi. He later was gaoler at Wollongong, south of Sydney. Hobbs married Mary Anne Joyce in 1842 and they had eleven children! He died in 1871, aged 59.

Even after his death Hobbs' battle continued. His widow's request for a pension was refused until finally Plunkett intervened. Hobbs Gully near Myall Creek is named after him.

And what of the other stand-out, George Anderson?

No reward there either, I am afraid.

George got his ticket-of-leave in September 1841, barely before those who had committed the murders got theirs. His ticket required he work for the sympathetic Mr. Townsend, for his own protection. He later moved to Sydney and was given his conditional pardon in September 1846. There his trail vanishes.

There was absolutely no difference in the treatment of Anderson and those four who got off. One of his descendants came to Myall Creek, but his trail vanished also. No-one thought to get his details!

And what of the Myall Creek Aboriginal people themselves?

The descendants today of course come from the few who escaped. But of those at Myall Creek in 1838 all we know is that in the 1860s a very old Aborigine was reported on McIntyre's station. He was known as King Sandy, the same name that was recorded at Myall Creek.

What is my conclusion?

As someone said in reading this history, 'The just rewards and punishments in this life do not always have a close connection'.

27

The Lorax

At the Myall Creek commemoration this year a young Gamilaroi woman sang impromptu in language. Maybe because it was in language, maybe it was the beauty of her voice, but whatever, it was deeply impacting.

Even the AGM was inspiring, with actual architect plans for the new Educational and Cultural Centre.

But what is really resonating, is something this year's guest speaker, Aboriginal singer-songwriter Kev Carmody, said. He is famous for *Out of little things big things grow*. He sang it for us, since it describes exactly what is happening at Myall Creek.

His comment? The forces that led to the global financial crisis are the very same that made the 1838 massacre at Myall Creek inevitable.

I am now on the way home again and decide to inject some life into my travelling companions. I mention my musings on Carmody.

'Noticed it too,' someone says. He adds sagely the GFC is driven by greed. We all nod in wise agreement. I then mention I had just read a book that decades ago predicted the GFC.

'Really?' They are all awake now.

'A weighty book, impenetrable to most economists.' They all seem suitably impressed.

'Written by a well-known doctor.' They are totally non-plussed.

'It's Dr Suess.'

'Suess! The kids' writer?'

'The very one. In *The Lorax*.'

I relate for the uninformed in the car the story of the Lorax, a being who speaks for the trees and animals. A boy who lives next to a now urban wasteland, sees the name on a derelict street sign and wonders where this Lorax has gone. He asks an old hermit, Onceler, who recounts how he himself had come to live here:

Way back in the days when
The grass was still green
And the pond still wet
And the clouds were still clean ...

Onceler however, over the Lorax's protests, cuts down trees to make an item no-one really needs even as the Lorax with growing alarm points out the animals are hungry, the fish and birds dying from pollution. Onceler replies,

I, the Onceler, felt sad
As I watched them go.
BUT …
Business is business!
And business must grow.
I meant no harm. I most truly did not.
But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.

'Amazing you remember the verses.'

'Well I only read it recently,' I reply humbly. 'And they do rhyme.'

When the last tree is cut down, I continue, all Onceler's friends flee – as in the end does the Lorax himself, leaving behind only a pile of rocks with the word 'unless'.

A now penitent Onceler says to the boy 'unless' means unless someone like him cares, nothing can change. He

tosses the boy the very last seed to grow a forest that the Lorax, and life, might yet come back.

They all enjoy the re-telling.

Well then, buy the book, I tell them. Send in your children or grandchildren to buy it if you must, but just get it. Then pretend to read it for their sake.

Biggering … I recall the baby colony in New South Wales scarcely survived its birth, was unable to feed itself, dependent on unreliable food ships from Mother. When supply vessels were lost, baby nearly died.

Traumatic.

But somehow survive it did, eventually exporting whale oil and seal skins. And then they discovered wool.

Through some clever breeding (we are clever people) Australian wool became better than British, Spanish or German wool. Combine this with all that limitless and above all empty land, plus free convict labour – well, what a once in a century investment opportunity ...

Walcha! I put the window down. Still freezing. We have arrived in time for lunch. Only thing is, being Sunday, everything is shut – no KFC here – and I am not hopeful.

Well how wrong I am. A café is open! No frills, for sure. There is a welcome sign on the wall: 'I can only be nice to one person a day. Today is not your day, and tomorrow isn't looking too good either'.

We feel at home. We order, and when getting the food she is upset we did not tell her we are eating in – she would have given us cutlery! Appropriately apologetic, we sit down in an adjoining room with, wait for it, a log fire and a mural by a local artist which fills the entire wall. The chips come in buckets and the pies taste good too.

Thinking of the Lorax and the biggering that started at our colony's birth, I mention how on my one and only visit to America I had picked up *When Corporations Rule the World* by David Korten – had in fact been reading it again this trip. They are interested so, sacrificially, I go out into the cold and fetch it from the car.

I look up my favourite bit:

'People who experience an abundance of love in their lives rarely seek solace in compulsive, exclusionary personal acquisition. For the emotionally deprived, no extreme of materialistic indulgence can ever be enough, and our material world becomes insufficient. A world starved of love becomes one of material scarcity.'

'Wow. That's good,' someone comments.

'Wait for the rest.'

'In contrast, a world of love is also one of material abundance. When we are spiritually whole and experience the caring support of community, thrift is a natural part of a full and disciplined life. That which is sufficient to one's needs brings a fulfilling sense of nature's abundance.'

'Sounds like Aboriginal economics,' someone says.

'You know,' I continue, 'I did economics at uni but never learnt that. Economics 101 was all about those two unquestioned economic laws – limited supply and *unlimited* wants.'

'Went together with Australia Day,' comes the response.

'And with Myall Creek for that matter,' someone else chips in.

'And the penny still hasn't dropped that unlimited wants is the sign of someone about two, at the most five years old,' I conclude.

Well imagine that, we muse, a whole economic model based on adults who are two years old. If we were grown up, we wouldn't buy half the rubbish we do, mostly on credit, need half the drugs we take. Feeling lonely, empty, unsatisfied? Well, we have just the thing ... spend, spend, spend.

We order even more oil-saturated chips.

'Imagine the new Economics 101,' I continue. 'You are loved as the basis of sane economic policy.'

'Live simply that others may simply live,' someone adds.

'Based on Aboriginal economics we could use their approach as the foundation course,' another continues. 'We could cite Bob Randall …'

'Bob Randall?'

'That Aboriginal elder from central Australia who talks about *kanyini* – connection to land, family, values and beliefs, and … what was the other one?'

'Spirituality?'

'Yes, that's it. Spirituality. He could be our very own Australian Lorax. We could call it 'first principles for the economically challenged'.

'Wouldn't that be something?' I exclaim. 'Yes, and no cheating – definitely no doing 102 if you haven't passed 101. Knowing that you are deeply loved is the prerequisite for all the rest.'

'But we might never graduate,' says a small voice.

We have paused our discussion to concentrate on the hot chips. But I do now feel Carmody was probably right, that the massacres were driven, initially at least, less by racism as by the inexorable law of biggering. After all, this land was first taken not by family settlers but by the big

commercial enterprises of their day. In their shareholder bottom line Aboriginal people were but a ledger liability.

Relating this, I ask the others, aren't we still suffering from it, exactly what is happening today all across the north, starkly in our last frontier, the Kimberleys.

'Now that's a course in itself, surely,' I continue back in the car. My travelling companions agree. The title? 'Bloody Biggering'. Yes, that should bring them in. But what about our text? 'The Lorax, of course,' I reply. Someone suggests we could borrow the books in bulk from the local pre-school.

Then, Economics 103. Why not Korten's book? Why *do* corporations rule the world? Is it their limited liability? When we mess up, we end up in prison – why not them? (I find myself frothing at the mouth.)

Then in second year, what next?

We are on a roll. How about how our aged care and juvenile justice institutions started in a Tasmanian prison? Yes! And then maybe the architectural disaster of the University of New England as a case study of ... oh well, you get the idea.

The country I note, like the weather and our conversation, is growing wilder as we go.

'What about the GFC?' someone says.

'Yes, of course. Text? – have to be Humpty Dumpty, wouldn't it? You know Humpty Dumpty (the world gone egg-shaped) sat on a wall (street), Humpty Dumpty had a great (stock-market) fall – as you must if you sit on a wall built on sand – and all the king's horses and all the king's men (the G7, IMF, World Bank ...) couldn't put him back together again.'

'Humpty or the climate.'

Well imagine that. A whole new global economic analysis based on the Lorax and Humpty Dumpty. Wasn't

it Einstein who said the level of thinking that created the problem is insufficient to resolve it.

Why *did* I go to university? So I muse, am I surprised our world has a rising temperature, is seriously sick?

And what of Australia?

For Australia, I contribute, the only thing I think that has somewhat saved us is the sheer size of the arid desert interior, the source of so much of our identity, the very place most of us have visited only as tourists, if at all.

But of course. I mean if we are tourists to ourselves, strangers still to our own inner country – what other result can we expect? And who better to re-connect us to that Australian inner country than Aboriginal people?

Economics 303, surely …

Care to enrol?

28

At the edge of the world

We continue our drive up heavily wooded hill and down even more densely wooded dale and finally emerge from the mists into a cloud-free zone as we come up to our familiar top-of-the-escarpment viewing place.

We hop out, and go to the edge.

It is an unusual scene, us at the top, with cloud down below. In the South African movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* it ends like this, the Saan Bushman having travelled all that long way to throw his Coke bottle, this evil little thing which has caused so much big trouble among his clan, off the edge of the world, off this massive flat top cliff into the cloud-filled valley far below.

And throw it off he did.

So I get out my Coke bottle and throw it off our much less impressive cliff ... (relax, only joking, though I notice some before us have done just that).

And I wish it were so easy, just to throw away what is making us sick. Come to think of it I guess Coke wouldn't be such a bad start. Only thing is I confess to being partial to an occasional Coke.

We take a few minutes to stretch our legs.

The wind is bitter and suddenly I feel it. I am seated on a bench so I get up and walk a bit more.

Everyone else is back in the car but again I refuse to conform. I turn back for one last look.

What a journey it has been to here. This Myall Creek journey has led me to another place, a far better place, a far bigger country. My nation's story in that unfathomable way I see is my own story, and in seeking

to come to terms with the one, so I am being reconciled with the other.

Soon back to Sydney, to reality.

Reality?

The real world, to be honest, feels more like where I have just been, where I am, on the mountain top world of deep connection and sanity, and what we are going back to down the cliff, for all its impressive energy and busyness and big buildings and politics and hospitals and nursing homes and prisons, and even manifold good intentions, is so often the utterly unreal world, driven and disconnected and insane.

I pause and look down into what I can still see of the valley below, as the mist swirls in around us. My mind drifts to the Lorax, that aboriginal being that resided in the land and in each of us, that slowly retreated when confronted with all that endless biggering.

And we haven't even noticed his departure.

And yet … beneath all that I am seeing something else.

Where? Why, in the story of this book, the ongoing story of Myall Creek and the memorial.

Even in my own story.

I get into the car, glad to be in the warmth, and we all clip ourselves in.

There is always, too, Onceler's 'unless'.

These days I am seeing a myriad of ordinary people planting 'Onceler' seeds: sustainable regenerative farming, community gardens, grassroots democracy projects, reconciliation initiatives, new industries around clean energy options, exploring and expressing culture, empowering the marginalised …

The list is endless.

A recent discovery is the growing co-op movement in Australia, empowering people as priority over profits, very practically writing again our *real* story, the story of community, the story waiting for us to embrace at Sydney Cove in 1788 to which we were then blind.

But is there still time?

'We did not lose, but we could not win' was that Aboriginal epitaph of the black wars in Tasmania. Will that too be our epitaph? But then again in Tasmania the indigenous people *have* won out in the end, haven't they, with their re-finding of culture and identity?

'C'mon, let's go!'

This I now do know. The path to our future passes through our past, through the Myall Creeks hidden in all our histories, personal and national. It is there we re-find our heart and this time round must learn to heed its shy whisperings. It is there we find eyes to see.

'Hurry up!'

'O righto. I hear you! Let's go!'

I look out for missiles appearing from the mist, put my foot on the accelerator, and within minutes start our steep descent on our way to Gloucester, Sydney and finally Ryde which is, after all, my home country, Bennelong's burial place, country of the Wallumetta clan, whose name by adoption I now bear. Remember? Those people who walked though my backyard as recently as 180 years ago.

Sometimes I think they still do, tapping me on the shoulder.

Lest I forget, I remember them.

2020

Road without an end

29

Never give up

2020 – ten years since the last chapter! But not wasted years. From this higher hill of experience I do see some things more clearly. And I do have some good excuses.

Sallie and I got involved in NT (Northern Territory) elections, in 2016 campaigning for Yolŋu Indigenous pilot Mark Yingiya Guyula. He won – by *eight votes*, as an Independent unseating the (white) government deputy leader. A traditional man, these days he says he is using his childhood hunting skills to good effect in the impenetrable jungle of Parliament.

It was a hair-raising privilege to be up there. Hair-raising in that they don't drive on the mostly dirt roads – they fly (not unlike some of our committee). Keeps your interest, not to mention the occasional tree across the road. But no worries, we had an axe.

The privilege was sitting in really remote Aboriginal communities and listening to Yolŋu Matha, Yolŋu language, in a spot where they have lived continuously for 40 or 50 thousand or more years. It was like I was in another country, another place, another time, a place of such deep connection. I felt a total Johnny-come-lately.

Which is what I am.

Well, also in these ten years of writing absence, following on from the wisdom of the Lorax and Humpty Dumpty, I have discovered two new courses.

The first inspiration comes from Bruce Pascoe, a Tasmanian Aboriginal, as he unfolds in *Dark Emu* the civilisation that was B.B. (you know, Before the British).

The book was a revelation – the sustainable farming, the aqua culture and food storage systems, the extent of trade; the profound legal and political structures that do

not change with each election; the scope of the spiritual landscape intimately in dialogue with the physical.

And yet I confess, with shame, I had never before attached 'civilisation' to their world. Maybe thankfully. For what is it but civilisation as we know it with all its endless biggering that is making us, and our planet, ill?

So, in 1788 – who was meeting who? As Carl Jung puts it, people and cultures into power over others and on the take, are the least evolved; those who find completion in the spiritual world, the most.

Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins said years ago, how much Australia has impoverished itself by failing to listen to, and learn from, Aboriginal people. Or, as Australian author and historian Inga Clendinnen observes: 'There remains a scar on the face of the country, a birth-stain of injustice and exclusion directed against that people who could so easily provide the core of our sense of ourselves as a nation but who remain on the fringes …'

Course text? *Dark Emu* for starters. Yes, that would be Course 401. Or is it 402?

The second course emerged at a Sydney Friends meeting when an unexpected Aboriginal man appeared. A university lecturer, he wanted to tell us how after going to the 2018 June commemoration and witnessing its power and positivity, he has had to change the content of his lectures. Myall Creek keeps on having that effect. This is not about good planning, or good speakers, or our committee (we are human after all – well, most of us). Fabri Blacklock, Aunty Sue Blacklock's niece, described it on national television as a 'place of love'. And where such love is, transformation always follows.

So this transformative phenomena called Myall Creek – what is it about? Healing? Yes, and healing not confined to the current reconciled descendants.

For Aboriginal people the presence of past ancestors is real. Tangible. So, logically, if visitors now talk of this tangible peace at Myall Creek, this can only mean that through what we are doing now, healing has come to those of 1838 also. In forgiving, in fronting up and receiving forgiveness in the now, we all have the power to bring healing to those *long since gone.*

A truly staggering thought.

Wasn't that what happened right back in 1998 at Myall Creek, you know when that huge storm broke loose right over our corrugated tin hall? As the Aboriginal people told us, the raindrops were tears – of grieving and of joy – coming straight from the Aboriginal people of 1838.

But what to call this course? 'Retrospective Healing'? Yes, that's it, all online, free to a global audience.

But then only yesterday playwright Linden from Sydney Friends of Myall Creek told me of two Aboriginal women from Sydney who went with her to Myall Creek in 2011. They told her they sensed the terror of the place.

Does that then negate all I have written?

Then I thought of Aunty Sue who speaks on our Myall Creek promo clip, reliving that pain. But of course. I mean, the healing can never undo what happened. But in this other place of today, there is such light. Both places exist and we can access either, but the healing is there for all of us to step into.

So no, I conclude, it does not negate what I have written – but it does deepen it.

We have also had lots of elections over the last ten years. We Australians love elections, don't we, confirmed for me at a polling booth when a lady shouted out, 'What a pain in the backside'.

Our democracy is in good hands.

NSW Labor's 2011 election loss was also ours. Their $3m dollars towards our Education and Cultural centre remains a promise. So too a sorry for 'State-sponsored massacres'. Oh, if only. The Myall Creek Memorial after all is based on such recognition of reality (now shown unarguably on the online Frontiers Wars Massacre Map by Newcastle University Professor Lyndall Ryan).

Policies steered through by Labor MPs Walt and David and Paul, they date back to MPs Bryce and Linda (Linda is a Myall Creek patron). I think too of 'those opposite', Liberal and National MPs, like Adam, Sarah and Don who helped us obtain a Create New South Wales $1m grant.

Not to mention the unstinting help of our partner-friends – Gwydir Shire Council.

Uncle Lyall recently passed on, with grandson Keith elected the Aboriginal co-chair – a passing of the baton.

In 2018 at Myall Creek Bryce laid his hands on my shoulders and gave a sort of commissioning to carry on. He had cancer and knew his end was imminent.

Since 1998 I keep meeting Willy Wagtails. Uncanny. An Aboriginal man clarified for me they are messenger birds. But then what is their message, little black-and-white feathered friends hopping across my path at unexpected times and places?

Why, like Bryce to tell me my feet are on the right path, to keep on keeping on. You know, never give up.

Never give up!

30

Makarrata

I was looking through some papers, and there it was, a poem I had written and then forgotten, awaiting, I guess, its time.

Land of my heart, my country
How I wish it were otherwise
Beneath your blue, blue skies
Terrible deeds were done, and denied
Papered over with wafer-thin lies

Land of my soul, my country
Your song once strong lies silent
Hidden in a secret story
Told today only in whispers

Land of my dreams, my country
How we need your embrace
Made only possible
Through the very ones on whom we projected
Our own disgrace

Land of my fathers, my country
There is no other way to be whole
Than walk together the path of true history
The story that was never told

Land of my heart, my country
Yours is a story of unfinished nationhood
Of Aboriginal nations' sovereignty never ceded
Of Treaty never understood

Mark Yingiya, you know the one who won by 8 votes, ran on Treaty (not at all a bad idea since we don't yet have one, unlike every other Commonwealth country).

A treaty between equals for, as elsewhere, Yolŋu sovereignty was never ceded. They have their own law, their own parliament – their own civilisation.

A treaty as part of the Commonwealth of Australia.

Yingiya's election to the NT Parliament in 2016 seemed timely. In 2017 Aboriginal people across Australia came together and put out a joint statement calling for a constitutionally enshrined voice into Parliament, for Treaty, and for truth-telling. Called *Uluru Statement from the Heart,* it was collectively signed at that incredible rock at the heart of Australia, Uluru.

Does it surprise you our Constitution was written as though whites only need apply? One thing I do get now. Treaty is *not* about helping Aboriginal people. I mean, haven't they already suffered far too much from our 'help'?

I need Treaty.

Without a treaty we have no real legitimacy in being here, since they are the original custodians of the land. The astonishing thing is Aboriginal people are even still willing to enter into a treaty with us.

Presented to the Parliament, the Uluru Statement was roundly rejected, a national day of shame. It was a cry from the heart for 'Makarrata', a Yolŋu word meaning when two sides in a dispute come together, face-to-face truth-telling the story, listening with respect. Traditionally a proven offender could be speared in the leg (sure beats Port Arthur). Based on Makarrata, this is a shared journey of healing, for who of us is unwounded?

Will a Treaty ever happen?

Will a national apology for the massacres, the place where truth-telling begins, ever be given?

What have I just written – never give up.

I mean there is even a very public debate on whether holding Australia Day on January 26th – the day the First Fleet sailed into Sydney Harbour, the day that marked the sky falling down for Aboriginal people, the date of the 1838 Waterloo Creek massacre – might not be the best date (a date anyway adopted only in the 1930s).

At least not without telling all the Aboriginal story too.

January 26 'Invasion Day' protest marches, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, grow in numbers each year. Maybe one day, one day, we'll even reconsider our flag and anthem.

At our last national Myall Creek Committee meeting, I got talking to Aboriginal singer and songwriter, Roger Knox, and author Peter. We got on to our flag with its British flag in the corner. We suggested designs. Someone listening in said why not pick up the three stories of today's Australia: Aboriginal; British colonial; multi-cultural.

But hang on. Don't we already have that?

Not yet on a flag, but in a song. Roger and Peter and I all agreed, so we decided. Let's form a committee to change our anthem – to 'We Are One'. I asked that directly to Roger – did he think Aboriginal people could relate to it? 'Sure thing.' Then blow me down he sang, with feeling, a couple of verses:

We are one, but we are many
And from all the lands on earth we come
We'll share a dream and sing with one voice
"I am, you are, we are Australian"

I came from the dream-time
From the dusty red-soil plains
I am the ancient heart
The keeper of the flame
I stood upon the rocky shores
I watched the tall ships come
For forty thousand years I've been
The first Australian

Moving, coming from him sitting right across the table. Sadly called to order by the end of our compulsory colonial tea break (we did get some things right), I later walked the corridors of my mind (googled) for the other verses.

Written by Bruce Woodley of The Seekers fame no less (who are they? Fair dinkum) and Dobe Newton, they cover it all – the Aboriginal story, the positive colonial story, the story of the land itself.

So, new national anthem here we come …

But wait. Where is the third story, the multicultural verse? It's not there!

Well, why not have a go?

Who? Me? Well, OK. But only because you insist …

I'm a seeker of a better life
Than the place I once called home
I'm a refugee from a war-torn land
Seeking asylum under the sun
I bring to Australian shores
My culture, my history, my all
Building on all that has gone before
I am Australian.

What do you reckon, Bruce? Dobe?

It's only a draft …

31

The third strand

Have you ever made a rope? Nor have I. Though I have it on good authority (which means I have no idea where I heard it – maybe from my fisherman grandfather) that the strongest rope has three strands, just because each strand is always connected to the other two.

In our Australian story the three strands are obvious when you look: Aboriginal, British-background-colonial, and then all the myriad others who came after, beginning with the 1850s gold rushes. And from all the earth they came – the U.S.A., China, Germany – and from Italy and Greece and elsewhere after World War II. And they are still coming, still looking for their own pot of gold.

At Myall Creek this third strand really began with a busload of Koreans. Up until then it was more black and white. 'How on earth…?' was the look written on all our faces as they arrived for the June commemoration. And someone said maybe they took a wrong turn. But no. They came intentionally, bearing a substantial gift from their Sydney church community.

This third strand is growing at Myall Creek, making the connection that everyone who comes to live in Australia inherits the existing story, and in the process makes the rope stronger (what a great image that is).

Fabri Blacklock, niece of Aunty Sue, and I recently spoke together in Blacktown, our most multicultural city, a city within Sydney of some 350,000 people – from India, UK, NZ, Fiji, Sri Lanka, China, Malta, Pakistan, Sudan … altogether *140* countries.

Ten thousand are Aboriginal. In 1821 Governor Macquarie set up the Blacktown Native Institute. Children were abducted (stolen) in the first attempt to institutionalise (that word again) and assimilate them.

Standing before them with Fabri, I felt completely at one with her, a feeling born I think of our shared journey representing the first and second strands of Australia. And now here we were, speaking to the third strand.

Fabri spoke first of the massacre and the Memorial. I followed with how everyone who calls Australia home is grafted into this story, of how a very great evil was done and then denied that it ever happened.

And somehow from somewhere deep inside me came:

'Sorry, sorry, sorry.'

The speaker after us, a Muslim community leader, was so overcome by our words he initially could not speak.

Along with Blacktown Police and City Council, the other organising group, 'Initiatives of Change', has the Gandhian angle that if you want to see change in family, community or nation, start with yourself – implying the world's problems (and answers) can be found within me.

Two Africans there that day are personal friends. Assefa, a Blacktown police community officer, is Ethiopian. Yousif is from northern Sudan. They came to Myall Creek, were ambushed, and now come back each year, working to bring busloads from Blacktown.

And talking with them, I picture a march. In Blacktown first, then again at Myall Creek. Aboriginal people out in front. Then white (really off-white, although when I see Englishmen with the trouser legs rolled up, I do wonder). Then all those colours and religions under the sun that now call Blacktown home.

A march in recognition of Aboriginal people, that it is their land on which we stand.

32

Meeting George and Charles

Australia's Unthinkable Genocide by Colin Tatz, such a very deeply shocking book title – to apply that word to *us*. And I remember Walt Secord, the Canadian Indian NSW MP, when speaking one year at Myall Creek summed up by saying: 'Genocides happen when people forget'.

Genocides not only of the body – of the soul also.

Well, it's time. This journey of not forgetting, of tracing the evil in my own national nursery story, had to come to this place. And there they are, waiting for me, as I knew they must be.

Of course I go to George first. You know who they are by now, don't you, George and Charles? They were the two convicts at Myall Creek station when the gang rode in, the ones who under duress on the spur of the moment made such different, unalterable decisions.

George Anderson and Charles Kilmeister.

I have so wanted to meet George again. He is such an ordinary guy, little in size maybe but oh so big in stature. Little big man.

I shake his hand. 'How are you, mate?' (what else could I say?) And into my mind comes those haunting lines:

Journeying into my nation's past
I come face to face with myself at last …

So in meeting George, I am meeting myself? Well, I am very OK with that. A bit of a surprise though, for

until now I had taken those lines to mean only meeting the bad. But now in meeting George I realise I am meeting that neglected potential in me for the true reluctant greatness that George showed (and precisely because he is no unattainable superhero).

Yes, he came from obscurity, an anonymous abused convict, and died in anonymity. But at Myall Creek he had a name, a name that would endure as one of the forever shining lights on Australia's spiritual landscape.

George Anderson.

Feeling my handshake didn't quite cut the significance of the moment, un-Aussie as it is, as I take my leave I embrace him. And yes, embrace that part of me that is prepared under duress to risk all as he did, and step into true greatness.

Lest I forget.

And yet we of the Committee no less, we *did* forget. When early on a sign was put up listing those who spoke up at Myall Creek, guess whose name was missing!

How could we? Far too easily. It was not deliberate. It was one of those blind spots, for he was after all – compared to the others who spoke up (apart from the two Aboriginal workers Davey and Billy who weren't allowed to) – just an invisible convict.

And how can you see what is invisible to you?

But today here, it is different. Today we see him and remember him. Lest we forget again.

Time to leave.

But not so quick! What about Charles?

There is still Charles, remember?

Oh … yes. I note again his receding chin, his pock-marked, pathos-filled face. And here he is, offering his

hand to me, he who played with the children he later butchered.

Will I?

There it is again, that all-those-years-ago conversation with Jo in the New England University café, when after we had seen that movie *Little Big Man* recounting the massacres at Washita Creek and later at Wounded Knee, she leaned across the table and said with such passion:

'Don't you *hate* those white men?'

Remember?

Remember when I said 'no' and she was horrified and I replied that I just could not dismiss the possibility that given the cruel world they grew up in, the enormous pressures to not defy mates who had formerly stood by you – well, mightn't I on that same spur of the moment's duress be caught up in the same crazy evil myself (what Prime Minister Robert Mugabe in his own massacre of the innocents in Zimbabwe called 'my moment of madness', a madness which shaped the rest of his life)?

Kilmeister after all, wasn't he the one who originally invited the Aboriginal clan onto the property? Could it have been that his play with the children was all along just a ploy with the secret intent to murder them all?

My conclusion is no. He was as surprised as any when the gang rode in. Not that I like this conclusion. Not at all, since it reduces the distance between him and me.

Some part of me can still rationalise, as did our other past Prime Minister, John Howard, that all this history is indeed very regrettable, but 'I didn't do it'.

It is not connected to me.

How completely opposite though to the English parliamentarian William Wilberforce in his life-long campaign against slavery. 'I mean not to accuse anyone,' he said in Parliament, 'but to take shame upon myself, in

common indeed with the whole Parliament of Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority.'

'We are all guilty,' he went on. 'We ought to all plead guilty and not exculpate ourselves by throwing blame onto others.'

Or in Paul Keating' words: 'We committed the murders, we took the children away, we …'

And if I cannot imagine myself massacring like Kilmeister did, I remind myself I can also kill by my good intentions, like the missionary Robinson.

And also by my silence, my doing nothing.

Bob from Sydney Friends told me recently of a Queensland massacre, like at Myall Creek of defenceless Aboriginal families, related in the 1924 autobiography *From Bark Hut to Pulpit* by Rev G W Payne. Payne was a friend of Bob's father.

While stationed in Queensland during the 1890s, and visiting a parishioner farmer near Cardwell, Payne had asked about the origin of a young Aboriginal man working on the farm. The farmer explained that he and his brother had been threatened by 'a score of armed men' to accompany them on a 'ghastly' killing raid of 'troublesome niggers'. The brothers indeed went with the gang but, 'utterly nauseated', the farmer had snatched the lone survivor away, a boy 'two or three years old', just as he was about to have his head smashed.

Unlike William Hobbs at Myall Creek in 1838, the farmer and his brother chose not to report it, though they 'resolved to report anything of the kind attempted again to the authorities, and warned the men concerned of our purpose'.

Well, couldn't their silence have been mine?

Wasn't this the silence Albert Speer, the only one of Hitler's inner circle to show a turning, was talking about? You know, how the takeover of evil was bit by bit, things unthinkable one year becoming palatable in the next, and that in this way the whole nation succumbed.

So – will I take Kilmeister's hand?

I realise if I don't I am refusing to face the same awful possibilities in myself, if not of brutal murder then of keeping silent like those brothers, my failure to speak up.

One recent past discovery is Governor Richard Bourke, the one just before Myall Creek. His record of social humanitarian reform is truly impressive. As impressive is his wife Elyzabeth. She made the journey out to Sydney despite having an incapacitated son, and being in poor health. She died soon after arrival. Sallie and I visited her neglected grave in Parramatta, Sydney, to thank her.

And yet.

It was Bourke who architected that devastating Terra Nullius doctrine, meaning land could be taken without payment or treaty, repealed only in 1992 (though still without treaty). And how many have perished as a result.

From Bourke I learn I can be an Anderson or an unwitting Kilmeister – *even at the same time*.

And now I suddenly see a very different Charles. He is *so* young, a young man totally lost, terrified, I imagine so bewildered at his own awful betrayal of himself. So I take his hand, and I can see he is facing in the faces of his forgiving victims the full impact of the cruel horror of his acts. And then, yes, I embrace him, for isn't that what the Myall Creek Memorial is all about.

It was after all not only him, but our whole civilisation that was on trial. Charles in the end I realise was but a scapegoat for us all.

And I wonder. Remember that course on retrospective healing? Is the healing only for those killed? Or is it also for those who did the killing? As the descendants of the Myall Creek perpetrators read out their apology in 2000 at the Memorial, were the 1838 perpetrators – well, those who wanted to – making their own apology with them?

I hope so for, again, aren't the perpetrators all of us? We have all participated, have all been complicit, by our silence or otherwise.

Their apology is my own.

More than reconciliation, I am finding this Myall Creek journey is nothing less than re-finding our national soul. And therefore, by deduction, my own soul.

The Myall Creek story did not finish in 1838. The next chapters are being written, by all of us, by our choices now, for good or ill. And so in that embrace of Charles – in that death of denial that alone births empathy in me – I determine to choose today not to act as he did. Even if it means risking all. Even if, like George (and yes, like William Wilberforce) I may be initially even very reluctant to do so.

> Kilmeister in seeking to preserve his life, lost it.
> He was hung for his crime on December 18th, 1838.
> Anderson in risking his life, saved his life.
> He was given a full pardon in 1848.
> He was now a free man.
> Free at last.

33

Sinking bores

'Do you love your own?'

'You mean us Aussies?'

'Yes.'

Sallie's question caught me off guard. So I played a defensive shot.

'Well, what about you? This history is *your* history too, the Empire and all that.' But she knows me too well.

'I asked you first,' she chipped in. Checkmate!

This was, I guess, the inevitable follow-on question from 'don't you hate those white men?'

And so, weeks later, I am giving my reply.

Do I? I'd better! Logically (I was a Maths teacher), it must follow that to accept 'them' is only to love and accept myself, for they are my own kin.

Earlier in 2020 mining giant Rio Tinto blew up 46,000 year old Aboriginal sacred site caves in Western Australia. Barely acknowledged, it could not have happened without the nod somewhere of powers-that-be. I mean this is not 1788. This is in Australia, today.

I remember a French anthropologist visiting such caves, incredulous at the antiquity of the paintings but even more so, through his Aboriginal guide, by the fact that the culture behind these sites is *living* culture.

Only this week I have heard stories of racism, not something superficial, but deeper, almost irrational, individual but also institutional with Aboriginal deaths in custody and the ongoing devastation of the Intervention. Yet even in football matches it can emerge as if from some primal place, buried deep in our national psyche.

I do remind myself this culturally embedded and imbibed racism is not in everyone – even at the time of Myall Creek. What I do see different today is that those positive voices seem to be on an irreversible increase. And yet, even so, it still seems we Aussies can accept others with more ease than our own Aboriginal people.

Why? Is it the blood in the ground, our buried guilt?

I have just read *Knowing Mandela* by John Carlin. In his 27 years in prison Mandela came to love his 'enemy', learnt Afrikaans, became firm friends with his jailers.

Mandela discerned the Afrikaner true heart beneath the brusque exterior, their guilt over apartheid, the guilt which had become their laager-prison. As President, at great risk of being misunderstood by his own people, he embraced the Springbok rugby team, a powerful Afrikaner cultural symbol. In the world cup final he unforgettably appeared in Springbok colours. Then a spontaneous chant erupted, 'Nelson, Nelson, Nelson', over and over, like an expunging of that guilt, made possible through Mandela's complete identification with them (in this overwhelmingly Christian nation Mandela never spoke in those terms, yet his life surely showed Jesus' life more than any sermon).

The connection? Well, this so strikingly parallels the forgiveness at Myall Creek in 2000, when we in our guilt received that incredible unconditional and undeserved Aboriginal embrace from Aunty Sue and Uncle Lyall.

Just last weekend Sallie and I went up-country to visit a friend. Knowing our interest, she told us there was a massacre in her town, and the nearby town, and also on nearby cliffs where women and kids were pushed over.

This Aussie lady who has been through such un-imaginable abuse herself, has such compelling compassion and heart for the vulnerable, and for animals. Her little cottage is wall-to-wall knick-knacks, a magical and utterly original place. A place of beauty.

She to me represents our true Aussie story exactly, tapping into that vast underground artesian sea of life, under our own bitter Lake Disappointments.

So if at times our Aussie psyche laden with its guilt can resemble the arid desert (you can die of thirst out there), it

is important to do what dry country farmers do, sink bores to find water, in a place where water equals life.

My bores these days are mostly rural, trips to Myall Creek or visiting friends, or watching rural TV programs. Both ABC *Landline* and *Back Roads* when mentioning a town have maps which include the Aboriginal country name. This is ground-breaking. I have long had this vision that in meeting new people, when asked where we are from, we include our Aboriginal country:

I'm Graeme. I live in Ryde, Wallumetta country …

The creativity that gushes up out of these bores is without limit, stunning in its inclusion – like one Anglo small town embracing a Sikh community and another, a Karen community. Or an Aboriginal community in our far north embracing others in a way where everyone is learning from each other in a classic plus-plus.

I am also finding the emerging farming revolution based on carbon-capturing regenerative principles, acknowledging Aboriginal land management which for eons had practised just that. And even in one struggling town music(!) is heralding a rebirth.

As one overseas back-packer interviewed said, 'this is the real Australia'.

Well, I keep meeting this real Australia today in program after program, person after person. We are becoming friends – and just as well.

Isn't this real Australia also the real me?

I am reminded of what Myall Creek has taught me. There was a movie *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. I too could see the good, but also the bad operating to sabotage that good – and the results could be ugly. What happened at Myall Creek in 1838 was ugly, call it evil.

But today I have changed the tapes.

Yes, the bad cannot be denied, but the outcome does not have to be ugly. Our choices, made not in isolation but in community, if not removing the bad, can transform it into something truly good. That is the Myall Creek story. And it is becoming our Australian story.

Can you see it?

Behind and beyond the negative news a renaissance is taking place, led by Aboriginal people and their wisdom.

A recent survey shows community attitudes well ahead of our political response, with eighty nine percent feeling the need for 'formal truth-telling' on 'Australia's shared history.' This is an Aussie identity sea change, like a snake shedding its skin (is that a mixed metaphor?), a skin anyway now way too constricting if our true Australian character – call it greatness – is to emerge.

Culture is never static, and what Kilmeister and Anderson teach me is that it is by my choices I contribute to its direction. I can even dare to chart new norms, even if risking being misunderstood, or shunned like Anderson was, for when confronted by such stand-alone courage we Aussies can be great knockers – no tall poppies here mate.

Well, hang on. I can change that too, can't I? Change the convict tapes, starting with Sallie! Start *encouraging* her.

Now would that be a sea change (but what will people think?)

Oh, by the way, Sallie especially likes this last bit about encouraging. Water to a thirsty land, she reckons.

34

Moving into greatness

Talking about greatness I could mention the committee. I can't name them all because they will all be looking for

their name in the book (people are like that) and I might miss one! But I am anyway going to mention two.

Pardon me to the rest. Sorry guys – and gals.

One is Kelvin. Recently he did a zoom interview and, this may sound odd, but I feel I got to know him more on zoom than all the years on committee. I was aware he had a military background but, really, not much more.

Kelvin I discovered is a deeply spiritual man. Like so many Aboriginal people, he knows abuse and prejudice, but has chosen to forgive. That is why he is part of Myall Creek.

But there is something else.

In the army he tells the story of a man who hated him. Why? He was Aboriginal. Whenever they met Kelvin was verballed, or pointedly ignored. Kelvin saw this as *his* problem, not Kelvin's. Noting that he was an exception, Kelvin chose not to react but to respond with respect. This went on for some time. Then one day the man came up and said he just couldn't hate him anymore. Kelvin's behaviour, he said, had demolished his view of Aboriginal people, a view instilled in him by his mother.

Later the man invited Kelvin to stay with his family. Kelvin accepted. The father had no issues, but the mother was wary. By the end of the weekend however she too had been won over, asking Kelvin to look after her son, and giving him lunch for the trip back to base.

Recently I asked Kelvin what he thought of taking a minute's silence down at the soldiers' Memorial Hall before we went up the hill to our Memorial. He said he had thought the same thing! What I saw in Kelvin was the ready willingness to enter into that community's loss and show respect, even if that community was part of the culture that had caused his own people so much loss.

Janelle is in Health – and much else I learnt when I googled her name. I'm going to suggest our committee take a weekend, just to listen to each other's stories. Everyone has a story. A shock in store I am sure – aren't I a mystery to most (and to myself).

One thing Janelle does in her work is cultural awareness. It might be a group of police, some of whom would have stereotypes of Aboriginal people. She then builds up points of identification that they come to see her as a person with the same humanity as them, even if culturally different. What strikes me is that she is willing not only to forgive, but to meet embedded prejudice and then, like Kelvin (and yes, like Mandela), enter into their world and lead them out into a far bigger story, a story large enough to embrace us all.

I have always felt Myall Creek is about moving us all into true greatness, what I see in Kelvin and Janelle (they would just laugh at that). It reminds me of George Anderson. He showed that true greatness – you know, the convict who couldn't ride a horse for the life of him. And I wonder – can Kelvin or Janelle ride a horse …?

But I digress. What about me in all this?

I recall an Aboriginal leader in Victoria, Reg Blow, replying to 'how can we help?' with 'We don't need your help. If you want to help, go to your own people and show the way'. It was a challenge, not to judge, but like Kelvin and Janelle to show another path to walk.

35

Find my heart at Myall Creek

A pilgrimage is a journey, often into an unknown or foreign place, where a person goes in search of new or expanded meaning about their self, others, nature, or a higher good, through the experience. It can lead to a personal transformation, after which the pilgrim returns to their daily life. Wikipedia

I have just finished reading a book about Noel. Noel chose a different path to walk. Noel's life unravelled when his wife took her life. In a dark place, in his 70s he trained for years to go on a pilgrimage – in his case a literal walking one – on the Camino Way in France, and again later in Spain.

Noel describes his pilgrimage as the outer walk in constant dialogue with the inner walk. He begins each chapter in his book with a quote:

No-one in the world can change truth. What we can do and should do is to seek truth and to serve it when we have found it.

It is only by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. The very cave you were afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you were looking for.

The water wears away the stone.

Be concerned not to arrive, but to arrive with others.

It's not about the destination. It's about the journey.

Well, isn't all of that Myall Creek?

And when that new Education and Cultural Centre is built (which it will be!), what then? Having found that far better country those convicts were looking for, not in China or Timor but right here in Australia, do we then retire from life in yet another Port Arthur institution, that now ubiquitous retirement village?

Or do we, like Noel, leave our retirement village (as he indeed did aged 80, moving to a house in the Snowy Mountains) and continue our pilgrimage of finding truth and serving it, a commitment always challenging and never without dangers – as he himself will tell you.

Noel called his last book, 'I guess I'll just keep on walking'.

I have walked that long road to freedom,
I have made missteps along the way.

But I have discovered the secret that after
climbing a great hill one only finds
there are many more hills to climb …
For my long walk is not yet ended.

You know who said that, don't you?

No, no, not Noel. It's Nelson! (looked it up this morning). And of course – all this is yet another course, essential for graduation.

But woah!

What have I just been saying? Do we ever graduate?

I remember my father telling me of his summation of supervising university graduates. 'Utterly useless.' All those years of education had only convinced them they knew it all. 'Totally unteachable' my father would add, 'until they got some humility' (did he have me in mind?)

OK then Dad. I hear you.

Sorry guys, you enrol for life. After all that! But what to call this degree that never ends?

Why not … *Joining the dots: The path to the future passes through the past.*

Bit long though. Anyway, care to enrol?

Enrolment is so simple – check out *myallcreek.org* and come to the June gathering. Or come any time. Just come. Put it on your bucket list. Fly if you must. There is also a train, even if it means a bus at the end. You can drive of course, perhaps following one of the website reconciliation trails through other massacre sites, courtesy of volunteer Mary.

Or you could walk.

Walk! Well, after all, in four journeys Noel walked 3000 kilometres between the ages of 78 to 82. You have no excuse.

Come. Come home to country and meet all the mob.

And oh, of course, perhaps also …

Postscript, 2021

Our book launch was delayed. The good news? I can cover the 2021 June commemoration, held despite a Covid scare and heavy rain in the week prior (and a notice that it was cancelled!) Even so over five hundred came over two days to celebrate the new cultural space.

And to look forward to building the Centre itself.

Assefa from Ethiopia and Yousif from the Sudan (remember, who were ambushed by Myall Creek, coming now every year) brought a busload from Blacktown. The vision is happening. Well, OK, just a minibus, eleven in all, but nevertheless a prelude to many more busloads from Australia's most diverse city. Said Prasanthi:

Going to Myall Creek is the highlight of my 29 years of life in Australia. It was a very spiritual experience for me. I felt the healing, the love and welcome by our indigenous people. I do feel now I have the permission to seek and learn more about Aboriginal culture. The way the dancers invited us to dance with them, and the way Auntie Sue and Clayton Blacklock welcomed us on both days felt like a warm embrace … I commit to spread the message to every Australian I know so they get inspired to go on this journey to learn and heal and move forward together.

The Jewish connection this year also has to be important. Tanya, Jewish, asked Aunty Lenore how *could* they forgive. She replied, 'With all that's happened, if we did not forgive, we could not survive'. It was when she found out Tanya was Jewish that she embraced her, adding, 'Oh, my sister! You will understand. Both of our ancestors have suffered genocide'.

But it was not only Tanya.

Sydney's Holocaust Museum honours Aboriginal man William Cooper who in WWII almost alone in Australia

understood what was happening and spoke out. So in MP Walt's inviting Rabbi Kamins, head rabbi of Sydney's Emanuel Synagogue, one of Australia's largest (he wore his Jewish cap under a baseball cap!), could it be now that our Jewish community will speak out and support Aboriginal people as William did for them? You know, in remembering their history, now making history.

This year Aunty Sue Blacklock said of those killed: *They might be gone but they are not forgotten. There's no more crying. There's no more tears, because they are free. Their spirits are free.*

Yousif later reflected on her words: *The last weekend was absolutely remarkable. The journey itself was part of the destination. The friendships that were renewed and those that were established were phenomenal. The occasion itself was highly spiritual. This year I was able to feel peace, and there is no more anguish or inner weeping for my own ancestors who were massacred. There is no more weeping: we are at peace. This is a powerful message, expressed in action. I feel I have been cleansed of all depression and anguish for my ancestors. Through God I have already forgiven. But no more weeping. I feel my ancestors want me to establish peace, in a real way, through love and forgiveness.*

From that same 'Initiatives of Change' bus, Ivy from India – like Prasanthi and Tanya – said it was the first time she had felt Australian. Mike, himself a descendant of perpetrators in South Australia, said he realised Myall Creek was a site of national pilgrimage, his wife Jean adding booked-out-Bingara needs more accommodation!

Not to mention the Koreans who came – all pointing us forward to the unfolding truth of Uncle Lyall's vision:

'Myall Creek belongs to the world.'

Meet the author

Graeme has worked as a teacher in Japan, Zimbabwe and Australia. Married to Sallie they have three adult sons, and live in Sydney, the one in Australia.

He became involved in the 1838 Myall Creek Massacre Memorial initiative in 1998. Prior to that he co-founded the Australian Independents Movement *for political integrity* (AIM) and ran as a candidate.

The AIM (*aim4integrity.com)* gives a platform for Independents based on five core values – 'The five tests for political integrity'. The fourth test is:

Does it address historical injustice?

Since finishing this book he has decided to do what it says, to never give up and re-launch the AIM.

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