

# Reconciliation: do we need it?

The term 'reconciliation' has been prostituted. One pastoralist said that unless native title were extinguished on pastoral leases, it would set back the reconciliation process! Most politicians use it without having the faintest understanding of its meaning. Some Indigenous people reject it because there was no 'conciliation' in the first place. Yet we're stuck with the word until someone comes up with a better one.

What might Reconciliation mean for non-Indigenous Australians?

Those who have seen Mel Gibson's movie, 'The Passion of the Christ' will have no illusions about the suffering that Christ endured in order that we might be reconciled to God. It wasn't just the physical suffering, but that mysterious cry from the cross, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?'. The Bible account obviously, although with less gratuitous violence, anticipates the movie. The cost of being reconciled to God was inestimable.

*One pastoralist said that unless native title were extinguished on pastoral leases it would set back the reconciliation process!*

If we are to have genuine reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, I believe there will also be a cost. Like Bonhoeffer's 'cheap grace', cheap reconciliation is no reconciliation. But what kind of cost are we talking about?

During his visit to Australia in 1997 for the Reconciliation Convention held in Melbourne, Dr Alex Borrairie, a member of Bishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said, 'We must own our history'. He was of course speaking of South Africa. But if we are to have genuine reconciliation in Australia, then we too, need to own our history. That might cost us our repenting of our past indifference, injustice, prejudice and racism.

In what follows I want to take you on a journey: a journey of acknowledgment into some of our history – not a black armband-view of history, nor a white blindfold-view – but an objective one, which, I trust, will persuade some who read this, that we need to be reconciled.

I want to look at two particular aspects of our history that impose on us a need to be reconciled. They are,

**Part 1 The decline in the Aboriginal population after 1788.**

**Part 2 The failure of the Church to address injustice.**

## Part 1

### The decline in the Aboriginal population

Within the first 60 years of settlement (some prefer 'invasion') it is estimated that the number of Aboriginal people fell from around 250,000 in southeastern Australia alone, to around 15,000.<sup>1</sup> The main reasons for this dramatic decline were,

- **Destruction of food resources through introduction of sheep and cattle**
- **Introduced disease to which there was no immunity**
- **Massacres and indiscriminate killings**
- **Sexual abuse of young females resulting in near-zero fertility**

I wish to address just one of these points in this article, namely massacres,

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because it has been, and is being, hotly debated in the media since the publication in late 2002 of Keith Windschuttle's '**The Fabrication of Aboriginal History**'. Numerous articles by Windschuttle have appeared in major newspapers and in *Quadrant* all of which claim that with two notable exceptions, massacres couldn't possibly have occurred. It's

interesting to note the ideological transformation that Windschuttle has evidently undergone in arriving at his conclusion. According to Robert Manne, Windschuttle, once a radical Marxist, has reinvented himself and emerged as a neo-Tory! In a 2002 Harry Eddy Memorial Lecture, Windschuttle outlined his major thesis which was to appear in Book One of his proposed trilogy. In this lecture Windschuttle claimed inter alia,

- (a) That massacres were an invention of missionaries to gain sympathy for their cause.**
- (b) That governors, the military and administrators were products of the Enlightenment and the English Evangelical Awakening. (emphasis added) and hence only had noble intentions.**
- (c) That massacres couldn't have taken place because the settlers were British.**
- (d) That Aborigines had no rightful claim to the land because they didn't use it productively and had no word for 'property'.**
- (e) That the demise of the Aboriginal population was brought about by their own hands because they were involved in 'robbery and murder' and their women had no morals and therefore succumbed to sexual disease.**

<sup>1</sup> N Butlin, quoted in J Harris, *Counting the Bodies*, Zadok Paper, S115, Fitzroy, Spring 2001, p.2-3.

Apart from the overall slur on Aboriginality, each of the above assertions needs to be briefly addressed before our discussion proceeds.

### **Invention by missionaries**

The claim that missionaries invented massacres to gain sympathy is in the same realm as ‘fairies at the bottom of the garden’. Those who have made a study of mission history know that if missionaries wanted to incur the wrath of the settlers, all they had to do was advertise the killing of Aborigines. Early missionaries like Threlkeld, Gribble and Watson and ones almost a century later like Athol McGregor, all experienced a tongue lashing – and in some cases – physical attack, by those whose self interest relied on keeping rumours of massacres and ill-treatment under wraps. To take just one example: that of John Gribble. Gribble went to the Gascoyne River in WA in the 1880s at the invitation of the Perth Anglican Diocese’s Missions Committee. After arriving at the Gascoyne he quickly discovered that Aborigines were virtual slaves on the pastoral properties, that some had been shot and that most men on the stations kept Aboriginal women. When Gribble attempted to bring this to the attention of the press, the Missions Committee and other dignitaries, he was physically assaulted while on a steamer taking him back to Perth, was demonised by the authorities and eventually sacked by the Missions Committee (some members of which had pastoral interests) and eventually run out of town.<sup>2</sup>

### **Settlers were British and products of the Enlightenment and the Evangelical Awakening**

As far as (b) and (c) are concerned, we will consider these assertions together. Whatever Windschuttle’s credibility is as an historian, he would never qualify as a theologian! While the Enlightenment rightly questioned some of the accretions of the Church including superstition, top-heavy clericalism and an Aristotelian cosmos, it inevitably led to *Reason* being placed at the pinnacle of human endeavour, where revealed religion was replaced with natural religion and Deism replaced the supernatural and the attendant belief in the possibility of a personal encounter with God. These latter beliefs were, and still are, anathema to Evangelicals. There is little question that James Cook, and many of the military and the early governors from Phillip onwards were men of the Enlightenment who believed that morality could be inculcated – especially in the convicts – by harsh treatment and compulsory attendance at Church and that Aborigines would be drawn irresistibly into European ways once they saw the benefits of ‘civilisation’. As for being British, this would be laughable were it not for the fact that Windschuttle is serious. How does Windschuttle account for the 27,000 Boer women and children who died in British concentration camps in south Africa between 1899 and 1902, or those

*All of us humans  
regardless of race or  
ethnicity are capable of  
the most heinous of  
crimes.*

<sup>2</sup> See J Gribble, *Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land, or Blacks and Whites in North-West Australia*, Daily News, Perth, 1905.

who were massacred in Amritsar in 1919 when British troops opened fire on thousands of unarmed civilians killing about 400 and wounding over a thousand.

## **Terra Nullius**

Windschuttle's lack of understanding of Aborigines and their relation to country is almost inexcusable. It smacks of 18th Century *terra nullius*. In deciding that there was no Aboriginal word for 'property', did he examine all 300 languages existing at the time? Perhaps it was the British who didn't understand property rights because many of them had no compunction in confiscating spears, fishing tackle and other artefacts of the Aborigines who depended on them for their very survival.<sup>3</sup>

## **'Robbery and murder' and no morals**

Suggesting that the Aborigines' demise was brought on by their own propensity for 'robbery and murder' is all that Windschuttle can come up with to explain frontier violence. It completely ignores the avarice of many of the settlers and pastoralists who were determined to make their fortune and who were not prepared to let anything, including Aborigines, stand in their way. It needs to be understood that many wool merchants and cattlemen came to Australia to make a quick fortune and then return to England. Most despised the droughts, the fires, the Aborigines and even the landscape, and longed for the green hills of England with their thatched-roofed cottages. There is abundant evidence from pastoralists themselves to indicate that frontier violence and blatant sexual abuse was real and that far from being perpetrators of 'robbery and murder', Aborigines resented the destruction of their people and their lands and resisted it whenever they could.<sup>4</sup> Resulting conflict often led to the death of settlers – some brutally killed. Some estimate that for every settler killed, ten Aborigines died.

While it is true that Aborigines occasionally used their women as negotiating or bartering tools of trade – specially in times of drought when food was in short supply, it is also true that more often than not, camps were raided by white men in order to carry off young Aboriginal girls. Literature abounds with stories of 'Gin Sprees', 'Black Velvet', and other euphemisms scarcely disguising the sexual proclivities of the settlers.<sup>5</sup>

## **But back to the massacres.**

### **The World's biggest gaol**

From day one, the Christianity the convicts were to experience and the Aborigines were to observe had a heavy overlay of authority and harsh discipline, not to mention a stunning double standard. Many of the soldiers and administrators took convict mistresses (not withstanding having wives in England) and their behaviour was anything but flattering. Our streets and parks are adorned with the names of these 'gallant' gentlemen. Governor King,

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<sup>3</sup> I Clendennen, *Dancing With Strangers*, Melbourne, 2003, p.85.

<sup>4</sup> P L Watson, *Frontier Lands & Pioneer Legends*, St Leonards, 1998, pp. 87-89.

<sup>5</sup> R Neill, *Whiteout: How Politics is Killing Black Australia*, Crows Nest, 2002, p.132.

for example, when administrator of Norfolk Island, lived with his convict mistress and fathered two children while at the same time conducting Sunday worship and overseeing convict punishments. His successor, Joseph Foveaux flogged a convict 'until his exposed collar bones looked like two ivory polished horns'.<sup>6</sup> Lieutenant David Collins of the Royal Marines, Deputy Judge Advocate and Phillip's off-sider, while writing endearing letters home to his wife, had a series of mistresses who bore him several children. On one occasion his Chief of Police had a convict woman whom he believed had insulted his wife, stripped to the waste, tied to a bullock cart and flogged, When the magistrate tried to intervene he was threatened with arrest. Collins considered the flogging just.<sup>7</sup> Aborigines wept and protested loudly when they witnessed these punishments.

## The first Church service

*'No Man to be Absent  
On Any Account  
Whatever'*

A military drum-roll announced the first Christian service with an order to the convicts, 'No Man to be Absent On Any Account Whatever'. The sermon, preached by the Chaplain, Richard Johnson, was based on Psalm 116 verse

12, 'What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?'<sup>8</sup> The convicts may well have wondered just what their benefits were and probably concluded that at least one benefit was transportation, rather than the alternative – hanging.

## The First Killings

By 1795, with their hunting grounds from Sydney to Parramatta and beyond being rapidly taken over by the settlers' grain crops, Aborigines retaliated by burning them. In response, Captain William Paterson sent out killing parties to the Hawkesbury instructing them to, 'destroy as many as they could meet with...in the hope of striking terror'.<sup>9</sup> In what became known as the 'Battle of the Hawkesbury', Dharuk warriors defended their territory as best they could but the spear was no match for the musket. The warrior Pemulwuy was killed, and his head pickled and sent to Sir Joseph Banks in England.<sup>10</sup>

## Waterloo Creek massacre

On New Year's Day 1838, Major James Winniett Nunn of the Australian Mounted Infantry led a posse of soldiers, police and settlers in raids on Aborigines at Waterloo Creek which is about 100 Km west of Inverell in northern NSW. In an 8-weeks killing spree they covered a distance of 160 Km hunting down Aborigines, using guns and cutlasses. Many Aborigines in attempting to flee were herded into the creek where they were picked off by

<sup>6</sup> M Hazzard, *Convicts and Commandants of Norfolk Island 1788-1855*, Norfolk Island, 1978, pp. 9-12, 21.

<sup>7</sup> J Currey, *David Collins: A Colonial Life*, Melbourne, 2000, pp 269-271.

<sup>8</sup> N Macintosh, *Richard Johnson: Chaplain to the Colony of NSW*, Sydney, 1978, p.49.

<sup>9</sup> J Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity: A story of Hope*, Sutherland, 1990, p.40.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p.41.

the horsemen.<sup>11</sup> The year 1838 was a particularly dark period in our history. The Missionary L E Threlkeld, who had set up a mission at Lake Macquarie, reported these and other killings to Governor Gipps and to his mission agency in England, the London Missionary Society. In a report to the Colonial Secretary, Deas Thompson, Threlkeld claimed that up to 500 Aborigines had been murdered in raids extending over two years and that 'two to three hundred' had been slaughtered in the Major Nunn encounter.<sup>12</sup> While it is generally accepted that some of these figures might have been more guesswork than accurate estimates, there is no doubt that indiscriminate killings took place. In the letter to the Colonial Secretary Threlkeld commented,

***heathen Rome had her laws of war and peace, and would have blushed at the cold hearted, bloody massacres of the Aborigines in this Colony by men called Christians, and at those who could boast of their exploits in "popping off a Black the moment he appeared," without regard to his innocence or guilt.***<sup>13</sup>

Although Gipps made an attempt to deal with Nunn, the pastoralists let it be known that if he (Gipps) was too heavy handed, they would furnish a critical report to London. Eventually an inquiry was held into Nunn's exploits. Notwithstanding the fact that a member of Nunn's own party, Sergeant John Lee testified that between 40 and 50 were shot (contradicting Nunn who claimed that 'only a few' were shot) Nunn was never charged. In fact Roger Millis's 'Waterloo Creek' probably the most detailed account ever written about the Waterloo Creek Massacre (965 pages with almost 2,000 footnotes) claims that prior to Nunn's return to England he was enjoying himself at a Gala Fancy Dress Ball in Sydney.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the mass of evidence supporting the massacre, Windschuttle includes Waterloo Creek in his list of massacres that never happened!

## Myall Creek

About six months after Waterloo Creek, the most notorious massacre took place at Myall Creek, about 20 Km south of Inverell.<sup>15</sup> Its notoriety stems not from the numbers killed, but from the extensive publicity that resulted from the subsequent investigation.

Kamilaroi Aborigines had been 'employed' on a property owned by Henry Dangar – a 'pit street' pastoralist. They had been living peaceably on the property, ringbarking and doing odd jobs for the station hands who were 'ticket-of-leave' convicts. Contrary to popular myth, convicts were not all in balls and ankle chains working on the roads in Sydney Town. A TOL convict

<sup>11</sup> R Millis, *Waterloo Creek, The Australia Day Massacre 1838*, Ringwood, 1992, pp.168-203.

<sup>12</sup> L E Threlkeld, 8<sup>th</sup> Report to Deas Thompson in N Gunson (Ed.), *Australian Reminiscences & Papers of L E Threlkeld: Missionary to the Aborigines 1824-1859*, Vol 1, Canberra, 1974, p.145

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Millis, *op. cit.*, p.704.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, pp.274-321.



could be assigned as a servant to a master. Under these circumstances they were free to travel within certain boundaries provided they remained under the supervision of their master. However, as was revealed in a subsequent inquiry,

- **These convicts had their own horses, guns, ammunition, cutlasses, handcuffs and ropes.**
- **They rode extensively across northern NSW without hindrance.**
- **Their masters invariable had no idea where they were at any given time.**

**The inquiry also revealed that,**

- **The convicts and Aborigines were on friendly terms and would sit around the campfires at night smoking pipes and telling yarns.**
- **No motive was ever established for the killings.**

It seems that a free settler, John Flemming conspired with the convicts to carry out the massacre. On the afternoon of June 10, the convicts, all armed, suddenly descended on the Aborigines, tied them with ropes and led them out crying and wailing to an area near the creek where twenty eight men women and children were shot or hacked to pieces with cutlasses. The convicts then built a large log fire and threw the bodies and body parts on in an attempt to destroy the evidence. Later investigation would indicate that some babies were thrown into the fire alive.

## The Inquiry

Eventually, the superintendent of the property, William Hobbs, heard about the rumours and hurried to Myall Creek where, despite the fire, the evidence was overwhelming. Muswellbrook Magistrate Edward Denny Day was summoned to Myall Creek where he took down the depositions (statements) from the convicts. (These can be found in the NSW State Archives). The ringleader, Flemming, was never apprehended and it is thought that he may have taken the first available ship back to England.

## The trial

Eventually the convicts were charged and faced trial in Sydney. However, there was uproar amongst the settlers who protested loudly against white men being charged 'just for killing Aborigines'. Angry letters were published in the newspapers and the Sydney Herald established a fighting fund for the convicts. When the verdict was handed down acquitting the convicts, there was jubilation and applause from the public gallery.

## The second trial

The reprieve, however, was short lived. The Attorney General, John Plunkett, a devout Catholic, believing there had been a flawed decision based on a technicality, immediately ordered a new trial with a new judge. This time seven of the convicts were found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. This marked the first time in Australia's fifty-year history that any white person was convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of Aborigines.

## Reconciliation at Myall Creek

In June 2004 my wife and I visited Myall Creek for a reconciliation meeting. On a hill adjacent to the creek where the massacre occurred, a memorial has been erected. A path leading to the memorial from the highway has a number of plaques placed at regular intervals along the several hundred metre walk. Each plaque records a particular aspect of events leading up to the killings. When we arrived at the memorial, descendants of the convicts and the Aborigines spoke of their desire to be reconciled. It was a very moving experience.

## The massacres continue

With so much publicity surrounding Myall Creek and the shock reverberating around the country following the sentence imposed on the convicts, one might have thought that it would mark the end of frontier violence. Unfortunately that was not to be. Massacres in many parts of Australia continued, with the Aboriginal death toll, according to Henry Reynolds, reaching 20,000.<sup>16</sup>

## Coniston: The last recorded massacre

Almost a hundred years after Myall Creek, the last recorded massacre took place in the Northern Territory. Who knows what unrecorded massacres continued? Coniston lies about 200 Km north west of Alice Springs.<sup>17</sup> 1928 was a bad year. The country was in the middle of a drought and whites, blacks and cattle competed for the dwindling water at the soaks (naturally occurring rock-lined crevices in the ground where spring water could be relied on). Fred Brooks, station hand and dingo trapper had set up his tent at the soak near to where some Walpiri Aborigines were camping. Given that the Aborigines were in poor shape due to the drought, Bullfrog agreed that his wife, Marungali, could cook Brooks' meals and do his washing in return for food. Sometime these arrangements extended to sharing the white man's bed, but it is not known whether this was part of the agreement. When Brooks failed to keep his side of the bargain by not providing the food, Bullfrog and Marungali killed the trapper and hid his body in a rabbit hole.

## The reprisals

*For two weeks Murray and his party scoured the country around the soak killing blacks wherever they came across them.*

Constable George Murray, based at Alice Springs, comes across as a 'John Wayne' character. Ironically, he was also 'Protector of Aborigines'. When news of Brooks' death reached Alice Springs, Murray lost no time in collecting a posse of station hands and set out

to 'dispurse the natives', a euphemism which usually meant killing

<sup>16</sup> Well documented accounts are available of other massacres in Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

<sup>17</sup> See j Cribbin, The Killing Times: The Coniston Massacre, Sydney, 1984.



indiscriminately. For two weeks Murray and his party scoured the country around the soak killing blacks wherever they came across them. Bullfrog and Marungali, however, eluded them. Arriving back in Alice Springs, Murray was hailed as a hero. Following another (non fatal) attack on another trapper, 'Nugget' Morton, known for his womanising, Murray set out again, this time for three weeks. The official count was 17 dead. The Walpiri claimed that the number killed was seventy.

## Enter Athol McGregor

Athol McGregor is described as a lay missionary. His pastoral care was for the whites living in the remote parts of the Territory. When news reached him of the events surrounding Brooks and the reprisal raids, McGregor went to see the Government Resident at Alice Springs. The Government Official told him in no uncertain terms to keep his nose out of it. Eventually two Aborigines who were not involved in the killing were arrested and tried for Brooks' murder. They were acquitted through lack of evidence.

But McGregor didn't give up so easily. He wrote to the southern newspapers and demanded an inquiry. With Australia on the eve of a federal election and unflattering comments appearing in the foreign press, Prime Minister Bruce finally gave in and agreed to a Board of inquiry. McGregor was ecstatic until he discovered who was on the Board.

*'I examined them and found their wounds were very serious. We then had lunch. The two died during our lunch hour'.*

None other than the Government Resident and a bevy of pastoralists and government stooges. At the inquiry, when asked what led to the conflict, Brooks unflinchingly responded, 'I suppose it's because they [Aborigines] are being taught that they are equal to the white man'. Murray was no doubt referring to Annie Lock, a controversial yet dedicated missionary. Under

questioning by the Board regarding the fate of wounded Aborigines, Murray, once again responded in a way that, had it not been a 'Kangaroo Court', would have incriminated him. 'Well, what could I do with wounded blackfellows...a hundred miles from civilisation?' Murray obviously aimed to kill. When commenting specifically about two wounded Aborigines, Murray's reply was even more callous. 'I examined them and found their wounds were very serious. We then had lunch. The two wounded died during our lunch hour.'<sup>18</sup> The verdict? All were acquitted on the grounds they acted in self defence!

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.142-146.

## Part 2

### The Failure of the Church to address injustice

Christians often act defensively when it is argued that the Church failed to act justly in the face of Aboriginal massacres, theft of land and more generally – outright neglect. But the facts cannot be ignored.

#### The First Test

On 7 September 1790 when Governor Phillip was speared in the shoulder at Manly Cove, to his great credit, he took no retaliatory action.<sup>19</sup> Most likely, Bennelong was able to persuade him that the spearing was the result of a misunderstanding. However, two months later Phillip reacted differently. His gamekeeper, John McIntyre, had been speared and although it was not immediately fatal, he died about ten days later. Yet before McIntyre's demise, Phillip ordered Captain Watkin Tench to dispatch a party of soldiers to go out and bring back the heads of ten Aboriginals – *any ten*. Tench managed to persuade Phillip to reduce the head-count to six.<sup>20</sup> Second Lieutenant William Dawes, who was a Christian, was, not surprisingly, troubled by Phillip's decree and sought the counsel of the Chaplain, Richard Johnson. Johnson advised Dawes that he should obey his superiors.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately for the Aboriginals, the soldiers got caught in bad weather and gave up until the next day. Then they got caught in a bog and had to be rescued. By this time Phillip had lost interest.

Now it would be easy to conclude that Johnson was a bad man. Yet he was a nominee of the anti-slave-traders, John Newton and William Wilberforce. Johnson demonstrated a genuine concern for the convicts and he and his wife cared for an Aboriginal girl who chose to attach herself to his household. Yet for some reason, his concern for justice did not extend to the Aboriginal tribes in the same way.

#### How the Church saw Aboriginals

Part of the problem was that many people, including those within the Church, blindly accepted Enlightenment views about 'Progress'. Those espousing Enlightenment thinking believed that native tribes were destined to disappear with the advance of more advanced civilisations. Some believed that Aboriginals were the descendants of Ham. It was widely accepted that it was a waste of time 'Christianising' the natives before they were 'Civilised'. Most were obsessed with the notion that to become 'civilised', Aboriginals would have to give up their

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<sup>19</sup> Cpt. Watkin Tench, 'Sydney's First Four Years', being a reprint of *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay 1788 – 1791*, Sydney, 1979, pp.179-180.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, pp.207-209.

<sup>21</sup> Harris, *op. cit.*, p.38.

nomadic habits. Many believed that Aborigines had no concept of God. Others, that Aborigines were incapable of gaining immortality. But as John Harris points out 'God didn't arrive with the First Fleet'. Many Aboriginal tribes had a very definite belief in a Supreme Being who created them and the landscape.

With such views commonly held it is perhaps not surprising that the question of injustice was not on the Church's agenda. One classic example of this thinking occurred in America, where a Christian benefactor left his plantation estates complete with 300 slaves to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). The Society evidently saw little reason to decline the offer.<sup>22</sup>

## The first missionaries

In contrast to the Church's seeming indifference, many of the missionaries were dedicated to their task, lived with a level of poverty approaching that of the Aboriginal people they were trying to minister to and carried on in the face of opposition from the settlers and in many cases total lack of support from the Church and the Colonial Government. One of the first missionaries was **Lancelot Edward Threlkeld** who established a mission at Lake Macquarie, northern NSW. Threlkeld was a man before his time. He not only learned the Awabakal language but also constructed its grammar and translated the whole of Luke's Gospel into Awabakal. Knowing the language, he was also able to defend and plead for Aborigines in court since they were not allowed to take an oath on the Bible.<sup>23</sup>

In 1832 **William Watson** (London CMS) and two German missionaries went out to the Wellington Valley in NSW to establish a mission. They were accompanied by a contingent of soldiers and, as Harris asks, 'what kind of message did this sent to the Wiradjuri people?' Such was the rampant sexual exploitation of Aboriginal girls by the settlers, that when Watson was attempting to set up a school for Aboriginal children, the Wiradjuri believed it was for sexual purposes. To quote Harris again, 'There was scarcely a settler's hut in the district where white men whether master, overseer or convict did not retain Aboriginal women'.<sup>24</sup>

*'There was scarcely a settler's hut in the district where white men whether master, overseer or convict did not retain Aboriginal women'*

## Missions closed down

By the mid 1800s, with dwindling support from the authorities, lack of support from the Churches, open hostility from the settlers, and decreasing numbers of Aborigines through disease and dispersals, most missions in NSW were abandoned.

<sup>22</sup> A Friend, 'The Christian, Race and Racial Prejudice: Some Personal Reflections', in *Interchange*, No. 14, Sydney, 1973, p.65.

<sup>23</sup> Harris, *op. cit.*, pp.55-57.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.64.

## Delving into the archives

While researching some history in preparation for a motion to be introduced in the 1996 Anglican Synod, I came across some interesting, if unflattering, material. The Church Society was the forerunner of the Home Mission Society, later to become Anglicare. In its first annual report in 1856 the following is recorded,

***'[the] Prospect of establishing a mission to the Aborigines of NSW is not very encouraging at present...The demand for missionaries in every part of the world is, however, so great, that hitherto these inquiries have been fruitless. The wants of the professedly Christian population in this Colony are at present so pressing that every person capable of being employed as a clergyman or catechist has found a sphere of labour'***

A search through successive annual reports showed that either the above comment was repeated or there was no comment at all. The 1860 report reads as follows,

***'In reference to one of the objects for which this Society was organised, vis., the maintenance of a Mission to the Aborigines, the Committee, while expressing their regret that hitherto nothing has been done towards carrying out these objects nevertheless entertain a confident hope that before the next annual meeting they will have something satisfactory to report with regard to this part of the Society's work.'***

Now the thing to note is that while this deliberation was ensuing, Aborigines were still being shot, poisoned and raped on the frontier and even while Sydney's St Andrews Cathedral was being built. Work started on it in 1837 and it was completed in 1868 with numerous breaks in its construction. Eventually, In 1861, the Church Society found one hundred and fifty pounds which it forwarded to the Bishop of Melbourne who was responsible for a mission on the Murray River.<sup>25</sup>

Another comment contained in the 1850 Diocesan Report shows that *terra nullius* was clearly a tenant of Church thinking. Commenting on why dioceses had not been established in the districts of Port Phillip (later Victoria) and South Australia, it noted dispassionately that,

***'hitherto they had not been inhabited'***, meaning of course, by white people.

## So do we need Reconciliation?

Of course we do. While we are not responsible for the shameful things that happened in the past, we are nevertheless responsible for what we have inherited, a country where Aboriginal people are three times sicker, die at three times the rate, have some of the worst health statistics in the world and have longevity less than that in many third world countries including Bangladesh, Nigeria, Nepal, Vietnam and India.<sup>26</sup> Our homes and Churches are built on

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<sup>25</sup> *Annual Report for 1861, Sydney Diocesan Archives.*

<sup>26</sup> *The Fred Hollows Foundation Information Pamphlet No 1.*

Aboriginal land for which no agreement was ever entered into or compensation paid. Unlike nearly all former British colonies that entered into treaties with its Indigenous, Australia has never signed a treaty. Many Aborigines are still trying to locate family members, forcibly removed as part of the Stolen Generations.

### And what about the Cost? Here is the story of one person who paid a high price.

Camilla Cowley<sup>27</sup>, was, until she retired, the owner of a pastoral property in Queensland. Blissfully unmindful of the ramifications of native title, she was horrified when she went to the mailbox one day to find a notification advising her that a native title claim had been made over her lease. Like many people on the land she had fought drought, bushfires, the banks, the collapse of market prices and other disasters and was in no mood for this seeming calamity that, so her lawyer advised her, could lead to the loss of her home.

This was war! A meeting was arranged to which the National Farmers Federation and the United Growers Association were invited as well as the concerned pastoralist community. Spokespersons from the Federation and the Association only added fuel to the fire by engendering more fear and trepidation into the assembled audience. That is, apart from one lone voice. That voice came from an Aboriginal woman, Ethel Munn, who called for calm and understanding.

Unmoved by this voice of reason, Camilla Cowley stormed out of the meeting and as she recalls, 'in one of those twists of fate or Divine intervention' walked down the street and into the office of the Gunggari people in Mitchell, to confront them over what she believed to be their intention to take her home from her.

Her property, North Yancho, had been developed by the previous owners back in 1912. As far as Camilla was aware, historically, there had been no Indigenous presence in the area. Didn't the High Court say that there needed to be a continuing connection with the land?

### A change of heart

Armed with this vital information which she was sure would settle the matter, she stormed into the office. But from that moment her life was to dramatically change. Firstly, she was to discover that the Gunggari people were 'one of the most gentle and friendly groups of people it has ever been my pleasure to meet'. It didn't take long for her to realise that she was not about to lose her property. As the discussions continued, including with Ethel Munn and her husband, Gordon, it became clear that what they wanted was recognition that they actually existed, and the right to have access to their places of significance where they could take their children and grandchildren.

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<sup>27</sup> *Land Rights Queensland, September 1977, pp.8,14.; Correspondence with Camilla Cowley.*

## Bureaucratic Problems

At the time of the lodgement of the claim, in early 1996, North Yancho was a 'grazing lease'. When the Wik decision was handed down in December 1996, it simply stated that all elements of native title on pastoral leases may not necessarily have been extinguished. While Camilla and her husband with the help of the Native Title Tribunal searched for ways of accommodating the wishes of the Gunggari people, a further complication arose as a result of the passing of the Native Title Amendment Act otherwise known as the Ten Point Plan. This gave the States the legislative power to include in a 'schedule' (subject to Attorney General approval) those pastoral properties which it believed had extinguished native title. To complicate matters further, the North Yancho property by this time had now become Freehold. This resulted from the fact that the category of the lease - a Grazing Homestead Freeholding Lease - automatically converted to freehold after a prescribed number of years leasing.

North Yancho now being freehold, meant that native title could not be claimed. Although the Cowleys were only too happy to enter into an agreement with the Gunggari people, there was no guarantee in the event of the property being sold - which the Cowleys were having to consider because of their age - that such an agreement would continue under new ownership. To overcome this, an attempt was made to introduce state legislation allowing property holders of freehold, or leasehold (where native was deemed to have been extinguished), to voluntarily enter into a coexistence agreement which would be registered on the title to the land. Such was the climate of fear, however, generated by the National Party that this idea lapsed.

Finally, an agreement was negotiated with the government to have part of the property come under a management regime where the area would be recognised as a Nature Reserve. Such an area of land would still be owned by the property owner but there would be strict control over grazing, and protection of timber and native grasses. The agreement would also recognise the Gunggari people, provide them with access and include them in the management plan. The Nature Reserve would be known as *Illmargani*, meaning 'Precious Water Hole'. Eventually, despite some earlier reservations about the proposal, the government agreed.

## The Big Day

Extensive negotiations between the Cowleys and the Gunggari people took place to work out the best way the signing of the coexistence agreement should take place. When the day came there were emotional scenes as a 'land, fire and water' ceremony was followed by the elders telling the gathering how happy they were that at last they were recognised.

With the Cowleys no longer in a position to manage North Yancho on their own, the property was sold. It was sold, however, with the clear understanding that the new owners would be bound by the terms of the *Illmargani* agreement.



## And the Cost?

Throughout all this time, Camilla Cowley came in for **harsh criticism by some of her pastoralist colleagues and those within her own Church. Cynics accused her of double standards since, they said, her property was freehold and therefore 'safe'**. Of course all this was 'sour grapes', amply demonstrated by the fact that in spite of her property being freehold she was even more determined to find a way of sharing it if a way could be found to make the agreement legally binding in the event of the property changing hands.

We should let Jesus have the last word in that very challenging passage in Matthew 5:23-24,

***If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.***

Obviously Jesus was addressing a Jewish audience, but the implications for Christians are surely transparently clear!

Tom Mayne, September 2004

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