

Frontier Violence, Political Correctness and Memorials: brief comments on Henry Reynolds and Bill Bryson

Peter Gardner (2004)

Henry Reynolds, pre-eminent of the so-called 'black arm-band historians', in his autobiographical work *Why Weren't We Told? a personal search for the truth about our history*, (Viking, Ringwood, 1999) has delved deeply into the questions of the recognition of frontier violence and its relationship with the reconciliation process. He has also examined the related questions of 'political correctness' and on giving access of the Aboriginal dead to the war memorials that dot our countryside. On the conflict and reconciliation he noted that:

"...above all is the matter of violence, the long history of frontier conflict. They (the Aborigines) want white Australia to own, to accept, to identify with a past they know only too well. Reconciliation means the reconciliation of the two stories about what happened when pioneer settlers met indigenous people all around a vast, moving, ragged frontier. They want us to talk about the line of blood. They want us to take it seriously and treat it with gravity, to recognise that violence was not just an aberration or an accident but rather that it was central to the creation of modern Australia. They would like us to admit that settlement grew out of the barrel of a gun. For how else can their loss of central lands be understood and explained?" (1)

Readers of this essay or any of my previous works on this matter - *Gippsland Massacres*, *Through Foreign Eyes*, *Our Founding Murdering Father* and *Notes on Victorian Alpine Aborigines* - will have no doubt about the 'line of blood' in Gippsland.

One popular author noted that before "the millennium, 'political correctness' became a stigmatising accusation by anyone who wanted media time to air their prejudices..." (2) The implication being that the charge is dictated by fashion. This charge of 'political correctness' often levelled at 'black-armband historians' as a smear, especially in relation to the conflict and the violence, is turned on its head by Reynolds who shows how little truth there is in this slander:

"It would be possible to come up with many more examples of the vexed questions of war, invasion and conquest. But it is clear that far from being a contemporary imposition on the past, the reverse is true. What we are seeing is merely the most recent upsurge of a debate that has been going on since before the departure of the First Fleet. If political correctness was involved in the matter at all it was in the suppression of these questions by nationalist historians writing between 1900 and 1960, who were more interested in telling heroic tales than in confronting the legal and ethical problems underlying the process of colonisation. Many contemporary Australians still prefer the 'amiable sophistry' of peaceful settlement." (3)

On my work in Gippsland the charge of 'political correctness' has always been laughable. I first commenced my studies and writing in the early 70's. It wasn't until the mid 1980s with the publication of my own work and that of Phillip Pepper and Don Watson, that the question of frontier violence was even generally considered in Gippsland. And far from being politically correct this work was new, somewhat controversial and challenged the status quo. The initial discouragements to both researching and writing this history were considerable and I sometimes wonder why I persevered. Certainly at the time no one seem interested in my work and even close family were more concerned about other things, in particular finances. Having any

enquiries about my work at all was stimulating and getting an essay published was a major occurrence. As an example of this early discouragement I was once in the State Library of Victoria talking with Andrew Campbell, then a successful author, who in no uncertain terms suggested I was wasting my time on an obscure subject. (4) Such work then when it was being researched and written was never perceived in political terms and the slanders of 'black armband' and 'political correctness' were in fact applied retrospectively and relatively recently. The act of labelling and smearing by calling someone 'politically correct' seems far more political, and incidentally often used by politicians, than the original research or writing of history.

Finally in the chapter entitled 'The Killing Times' Reynolds offers the stark alternatives - that the frontier conflict was either war or murder and asks "How are we to account for the Aboriginal dead?" If the answer is war then the Aboriginal warriors must be included in our respect for the dead as it currently is with conventional 'white' Australian war memorials and ceremonies. Reynolds asks:

"How, then, do we deal with the Aboriginal dead? White Australians frequently say 'all that' should be forgotten. But it will not be. It cannot be. Black memories are too deeply, too recently scarred. And forgetfulness is a strange prescription coming from a community which has revered the fallen warrior and emblazoned the phrase 'Lest We Forget' on monuments throughout the land. If the Aborigines are to enter our history 'on the terms of most perfect equality', as Thomas Mitchell termed it, they will bring their dead with them and expect an honoured burial. So our embarrassment is compounded. Do we give up our cherished ceremonies or do we make room for the Aboriginal dead on our memorials, cenotaphs, boards of honour and even in the pantheon of national heroes? If we are to continue to celebrate the sacrifice of men and women who died for their country can we deny the admission to fallen tribesmen?" (5)

In a slightly different way the same question was asked by popular American travel writer Bill Bryson in his *Down Under* (Doubleday, 2000, Sydney). Bryson journeyed to Myall Creek in the search for a marker or memorial cairn that he assumed would be marking the site of Australia's most famous massacre site. But there was no marker to be found so he went and interviewed a local, Paulette Smith, at Bingarra. (6) The conversation went as follows:

'And there's no memorial of any kind?'

'Oh no.'

'Isn't that odd?'

'No.'

'But wouldn't you expect the government to put up something?'

She considered for a moment. 'Well, you've got to understand that there was nothing all that special about Myall Creek. Aborigines were slaughtered all over the place. Three months before the Myall Creek massacre 200 Aborigines were killed at Waterloo Creek, near Moree.' Moree was sixty miles or so further west. 'Nobody was ever punished for that. They didn't even try to punish anybody for that.'

'I didn't know that.'

She nodded. 'No reason why you should. Most people have never heard of it. All that was different about Myall Creek was that white people were punished for it. It didn't stop them killing Aborigines. It just made them more circumspect. You know, they didn't boast about it in the pub afterwards.' Another flickering smile. 'It's kind of ironic, when you think about it. Myall Creek's not famous for what happened to the blacks here, but for what happened to the whites. Anyway, you wouldn't be able to move in the country for memorials if you tried to acknowledge them all.' (7)

Smith was certainly correct in informing Bryson that Myall Creek was famous only for the fact that the European killers were hung for their crime. She is also correct in that the 'killing of Aborigines' now became "more circumspect" - a seemingly obvious reaction at the time and a point I raised in *Gippsland Massacres* more than 20 years ago. As for the last sentiment it is more than a trifle exaggerated. In fact I think the opposite - that these sites should and are being marked across Australia and I am aware that my work has helped in the marking of relevant Gippsland sites.

As for Henry Reynolds argument for the Aboriginal dead joining those on white Australian war memorials I believe this will take some time and perhaps will await generational change. Also there are a number of practical applications which can create obstacles to this such as the identifying of Aboriginal names, if any, to be added to these memorials. Likewise any specific memorial to the black war and its victims - mostly Aboriginal - are unlikely to survive vandalism and desecration in Gippsland or elsewhere.

There are already substantial stone cairns dotted throughout Gippsland and commemorating the activities of Angus McMillan and other early Europeans [photo below]. (8) It has suggested by at least one Kurnai descendant that small plaques noting the prior occupation of the lands by the Kurnai and perhaps mentioning the 'black war' can be easily added to these cairns.(9) The problem of defacing will remain and change and improvements will be slow and gradual. The question of whether, and if so how, to use war memorials remains. Perhaps representatives of the Kurnai and RSL communities can come to an agreement on small plaques to be added to memorials, starting with those lonely isolated stone monuments remembering the fallen in World War I and, indirectly, the communities that they once belonged to, which have since disappeared [photo below].

End Notes

1. Reynolds, Henry. *Why Weren't We Told? a personal search for the truth about our history*, (Viking, Ringwood, 1999)p.126 This is not a proper review and I have just selected a few points and arguments from Reynolds of personal interest. But the book as a whole is of great interest in the continuing 'frontier conflict' debate and is highly recommended.

2. Gash, Jonathan. *A Rag, a Bone and a Hank of Hair*, Macmillan London, 1999, p.98-9

3. Reynolds, Henry. op. cit. p.164

4. About 1976. Blazey, P. & Campbell, A. *The Political Dice Men*, Outback Press, Melbourne, 1974
5. Reynolds, Henry. op.cit. p.172
6. There is now a memorial marker at Myall Creek.
7. Bryson, Bill. *Down Under* Doubleday, 2000, Sydney p.203
8. There would be a certain irony in this as Angus McMillan was implicated in the demise of many Kurnai during the Gippsland 'black war'. There are many of these cairns all erected in 1927.
9. This idea was first suggested to me in passing by a field officer of the Ramahyuck Corporation whose name and details I have unfortunately lost.
10. Such as at the monument at Reedy Flat near Ensay – population less than 10.



Reedy Flat World War 1 Memorial Cairn (photo Gardner 2015)



The Author at the McMillan Cairn in Swifts Creek 1988 (photo Howard Reddish)