KEYNOTE ADDRESS

A Haunted Country?

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'Haunted' is a word of Judith Wright's, that famous child of New England. She, better than anyone else I think, has articulated the tortured ambivalence of 'land and identity' in settler Australia. Drawing powerfully on her own family heritage in pastoral Australia, in New South Wales and Queensland, she has explored the moral predicament of the European 'occupation'. In *The Generations of Men* (1959), her grandfather Albert Wright reflects on the psychological legacy of the frontier which, later in life, he begins to perceive as 'the mortal wound that the blacks had known how to deal in return for their own dispossession':

> To forgive oneself [Albert muses]—that was the hardest task. Until the white men could recognise and forgive that deep and festering consciousness of guilt in themselves, they would not forgive the blacks for setting it there ... He imagined a whole civilization haunted, like a house haunted by the ghost of a murdered man buried under it. The thought recalled to him suddenly the day when he had seen—or imagined—that tall warrior standing on a plain where no warrior could have been, beckoning him across to nothing but a low tussock and the teasing heat-waves of shimmering air. He was overtaken by a deep shudder at that enigmatic memory. Yes, they were all haunted—his generation. Perhaps his sons would be able to forgive, to lay that ghost in themselves; perhaps it would remain forever at the root of this country, making every achievement empty and every struggle vain. (163)

Judith Wright, later speaking of herself, wrote: 'These two strands—the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me. It is a haunted country.' What is meant here by 'haunted'? Something unresolved, spirits unplacated, ourselves unforgiven. The source of the feeling is as much private dishonesty as public wrongdoing; it is 'something unacknowledged in the self'. As Albert perceived, it is a secret internalised, or, as Judith Wright puts it, a love compromised, 'a heart accused by its own fear'.

In his 1980 Boyer Lectures, significantly entitled *The Spectre of Truganini*, Bernard Smith used similar language to Wright when he suggested that Australian culture is haunted by the dispossession and violence done to Aborigines. It is 'a nightmare to be thrust out of mind', writes Smith. 'Yet like the traumatic experiences of childhood it continues to haunt our dreams'. White writers for much of the nineteenth century often perceived the Australian bush as mournful and melancholic, an emotion commonly diagnosed as migrant nostalgia or literary romanticism. But Smith, in both his Boyer Lectures and a much earlier work, has argued that the melancholic perception of Australian nature had more complex and indigenous sources. Melancholy, he argues, was as much a product of fear and guilt as it was of homesickness and loneliness, a conflation of Aboriginal culture with the bush itself. As dispossession proceeded, writers projected the pain and anxiety of colonial experience onto Australian

nature. Marcus Clarke's funereal, secret forests that 'seem to stifle in their black gorges a story of sullen despair' were, suggests Smith, a product of deep colonial processes of repression and projection (Smith, *Spectre*). Many literary scholars have commented on the 'sweaty anxiety' that seems to pervade colonial writing at the mention of Aborigines.

There were indeed many troubled consciences on the frontier, people who were shocked by what others had done and fearful of what they might do themselves. Niel Black, a squatter in Victoria's western district, privately agonised over the murderous necessities of his new life, and carefully took up a run well within the frontier. J.J. Healy in his book, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, has described how 'Rolf Boldrewood' (T.A. Browne), also a western district squatter in the 1840s, wrote of his experiences with an arch and sometimes bitter humour. With a mixture of confession and coyness, he played with his own past as if unsure of how much he could admit to his audience, or even to himself. The nature writer, Alec Chisholm, who grew up in the Victorian gold town of Maryborough at the turn of the century, spent much of his childhood roaming amongst the mining scars, ironbarks and wattles of the district's dry, open forests. Although he felt happy and free in the bush, sometimes 'the "brooding" of the trees became almost fearsome':

> This was the unhappy case, chiefly, when dusk enveloped the ridges and gullies on dull days in winter. The ironbarks now had shed their friendliness. They were, perhaps, revengeful phantoms of the black men who had once frequented these forests. Especially was I uneasy when passing a spot on a ridge-top in which white pipeclay contrasted with the sombre colour of the trees ...
> (*Joy of the Earth* 64)

Half a century earlier, the visiting writer William Howitt (Alfred Howitt's father) had reflected on the fantasies prompted by riding at night through the Black Forest near Mount Macedon. Amongst his imported reveries was a decidedly local one: he imagined that blackened stumps or fallen trees bleached to whiteness were 'like dark images of the natives, who have been pushed from their hereditary seats by the white man'. These fantasies were echoes of frontier unease. When Jane Bardsley married and went to live on an outback cattle station, she soon learnt that her husband also had his dark reveries, the residual symptoms of frontier life. In order to wake him up from daytime siestas she found it advisable 'to touch him with a long cane' kept especially for this purpose. She explained in a letter that this procedure was necessary because 'he jumps out of his bed very suddenly and always strikes out'.[1] The northern Victorian squatter, E.M. Curr, recalled how his decision to move into 'wild' country was resisted by his shepherds: 'On my men, all of them old hands, unoccupied country had a depressing effect, their ideas being that we should all be killed by the Blacks.'[2] From the very beginning, white Australians lived uneasily with the contradiction at the heart of their 'unoccupied country'.

In 1990s Australia, as we anguish over the possibility of reconciliation and the uses of national guilt and apology, non-Aboriginal Australians need to unravel those strands of which Wright speaks—'the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion'—we need to discover their history, and to see where they now lead us. Words such as 'invasion' and 'guilt' are highly political in Australia today. They raise questions about the legitimacy of European settlement, the nature of the frontier, and the responsibilities of Australians today towards the land and its indigenous peoples. They also raise questions about the moral and political power of the past, the hold that

history has on the present. We need now to rediscover a history of the white Australian conscience, to explore the moral sensibilities of the invaders, such as Alan Atkinson—a New England historian—is doing in his new history of *The Europeans in Australia*. We need to remind ourselves that doubts about the legitimacy of the European settlement of Australia are not purely modern, as some historians and many politicians would have us believe. Such concerns are not just the fashionable sensitivities of the so-called politically correct 1990s; they have a long and intriguing history; they are the emotional burden of Australian settlement; they are the recurrent, inescapable shadows and spectres of the colonial experience. Such anxieties will not go away, they need to be confronted and resolved. I think, too, that we must not overlook the fact that such anxieties are a potentially creative force in Australian life. Ultimately the emotional strands that Judith Wright speaks of cannot be unravelled; they are fatally entangled. The symbiotic imaginative relationship between settler and Aboriginal Australians deserves further study. As Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson recently put it, appropriation has gone both ways: 'We have taken from you [he writes] and we should not belittle ourselves by contending that we have had no choice in the matter.' 'This cultural interface', he ruefully concludes, 'has not been entirely woeful.'[3]

Let me draw out now some dimensions of that interface, some episodes of exchange and mutual appropriation on the Australian frontier; and there is perhaps no better place to begin to look for such a history than at the culture of collection.

Across Australia, almost from the moment of British invasion, cabinets of curiosities were gathered and displayed in lounge room, porch, garage and garden. Settlers dredged their localities for artefacts of nature and culture, for some immediate and meaningful past in an unfamiliar land. In central Victoria in the 1860s, a clerk of courts called R.E. Johns filled his sitting room with what he called 'trophies' of Aboriginal artefacts as well as stuffed natural history specimens. He even rode through a moonlit night across the Wimmera plains to dig up the skulls of two recently buried Aborigines whose nicknames he knew. He cleaned them up and displayed them in his domestic museum. A hundred years later, in 1961, one avid stone tool collector from Portland, Victoria, boasted to a fellow collector of his two week 'hunting trip', as he called it, to outback New South Wales. He described his haul of Aboriginal stone artefacts in this way: 'In all we sent home 13 Banana crates full weighing 2 Hundred weight to the case ... A most successful trip. We covered 2100 miles in the two weeks away.' His correspondent called it an 'ethnologists' picnic'.

I first became interested in collectors, and the collecting mentality, when I worked for a while as a kind of professional collector. I was employed as Field Officer for the State Library of Victoria, a job that involved the acquisition of historic manuscripts and pictures for the Library's Australiana research collections. It was known as the 'cup of tea' job, for it took one into the lounge rooms of Victoria to discuss the future of family papers, and the likely public uses of quite personal pasts. It was there that I found that boomerangs are often a decorative window accessory in Australian country homes and that Aboriginal milling stones still prop open the kitchen doors of some pastoral homesteads.

On one occasion, while working for the Library, I was told that the daughter of Charles Barrett wished to see me; she was unsure what to do with her father's papers and photographs. I learnt then that Barrett had been a prolific and popular journalist and nature writer who had died almost thirty years before. Charles Barrett, as well as

writing about koalas, kangaroos and kookaburras, had been a leading populariser of Aboriginal culture. When I visited his daughter, she showed me his surviving collections of letters and photos, and brought out boxes that had not been opened since his death in 1959. In them were Aboriginal artefacts wrapped in newspaper; some of them were sacred objects that Barrett had collected on trips to Central Australia. Even parcelled in a dusty box, they were, I suspected, still full of power. Barrett's daughter asked that I take the artefacts to the Museum of Victoria where her father had donated material many years before. During the long drive back to Melbourne I felt increasingly conscious of the boxes in the back of the station-wagon enclosing the secret/sacred objects. Whose were they? What meanings did they hold? What process had brought them here, surely a process that now implicated me? I thought of a scene at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a film about the archaeologist-adventurer Indiana Jones, where the immensely powerful Ark of the Covenant is casually wheeled into the vaults of a state museum. Was I, as a latter-day, second-hand collector, participating in the dispossession of a people and the disenchantment of the world?

In some ways, the Australian collectors mimicked the hunters whose artefacts many of them studied. The collectors were themselves nomadic within defined and beloved territories; they talked of 'collecting grounds', 'stamping grounds' and 'beats'. They wrote of their 'hunting' and 'flinting', they boasted of 'pickings', of 'browsing over campsites', of 'bringing back quite a useful bag', of joyfully discovering 'virgin' sites. They moved alertly across the landscape seeking their prey. R.H. Croll wrote an article for the Melbourne *Argus* in 1930 entitled 'Hunting the blackfellow' in which he described a collecting trip on the Birdsville Track that he undertook with the avid stone tool collector, Stan Mitchell. '[Mitchell] saw everything', Croll recalled. '[The plants and animals] were incidentals. His keen eye was all the time seeking other game. "Blackfellow!" he would call, the brakes would go on, and we would be out in a moment eager for the hunt (Croll 124–8).' Croll was describing a hunt for artefacts, not people, but the ambiguity was deliberate. There was more than an echo of the frontier in the language of collection.

Collecting Aboriginal stone tools was all the rage in early twentieth-century Australia, but the collectors carefully disdained Aboriginal informants. Their collection work assumed extinction, often of the people, and certainly of their useful knowledge. '[W]e are not much better off', wrote one collector in 1911, 'than the British Archaeologist delving amongst the barrows and mounds of his native isle.' That was the way they wanted it to be; that was their model for collecting. They were self-made detectives totally stranded from living testimony.

George Murray Black, an engineer, farmer and hobby collector, dug up Aboriginal skeletons from burial mounds along the Murray River for over twenty years from 1929 to 1951. Black was a keen stone tool collector. In 1939 he wrote to the Director of the National Museum of Victoria recommending 'a large truck' for the purpose. Black arranged for the National Museum of Victoria to provide him with a written request 'to obtain *aboriginal specimens*, stone implements & other things, just in case the police or other busy bodies make a fuss'.[4] But we now have a question that cries out for an answer: were any of the 'busy bodies' relatives of the dead bodies? Black was indeed wary of the 'Mission half castes and abos', as he called them, and plotted his 'poaching' expeditions to avoid them, 'as I don't wish to fall foul of the mission crowd who have a bad reputation locally'.[5] His collecting was based on the assumption that such people no longer existed or cared, but his scheming belied it.

The science of the collectors was built upon an invention of cultural discontinuity,

upon the severance even of Aboriginal memory. They did not want to recognise living Aborigines because it would turn their detached 'science' into a disturbing humanities.

When dealing with the black past, settlers experienced the tensions between conquest and inheritance. It is striking how many of the antiquarians combined collecting with the writing of history and the commemoration of place. They used their science of the past—expressed in collection—to articulate a history and geography of possession. Although they were prominent sympathisers with Aboriginal culture, they spoke the language of succession and inheritance, not of sharing or 'cultural convergence', a term in vogue today. This was clear in the way they dealt with Aboriginal artefacts, words and places—and in the way they avoided, or failed to recognise, Aboriginal people.

By the early to mid twentieth century, three main types of monument had been erected in the Australian landscape: they were memorials to overseas wars, cairns marking the paths of European explorers, and monuments to 'the last of the tribe'. It is hard to avoid seeing these three as closely related, all establishing and proclaiming the legitimacy of European possession of the Australian continent. Antiquarians and collectors were leaders in the campaigns to inscribe the landscape in this way. It is interesting to hear what was said on these occasions, particularly when prominent local Aborigines died. When an Aboriginal woman, Agnes Edwards, known as 'Queen Aggie, last of the Moolpas', died in Swan Hill in 1928, her obituarist wrote:

> We may think in white of the bush and love as whites the bushland. In degree of thinking and loving it will not be intenser than that in the blacks we may despise ... There is a spirit in the bush that belongs to them more than to white people. It is that which has been inherited ...
> (*Swan Hill Guardian*, 22 November 1928)

The 'last of the tribe' rituals in Australian country towns promoted in this way the ideas of inheritance and succession. Aboriginal elders were depicted as 'kings' and 'queens', emblematic of their race, and much was made of the loneliness of their deaths. Newspapers reported 'the extinction of another native tribe', spoke of the Aborigines as a 'last remnant ... giving way to higher civilisation', and recounted the statistics of population decline. The 'last' local Aborigine was often given the status, through Christian burial, of an honorary white, almost as a symbol of the succession of races. The monument over their grave or in the nearest town designated a frontier, a clear divide between an Aboriginal past and a white Australian future. In life, though, Agnes Edwards or 'Queen Aggie' had a much more pragmatic sense of the continuity and mutual accommodation of frontier life. A few years before her death, when she was questioned about the loss of a fowl that was noticed after her visit to a nearby pastoral station, she replied: 'Ah well, Mr Laird, you [binna] taka my country, I taka your fowl' (quoted in Penney 101).

The settlers' symbolic appropriation was often brutal in design. In 1904, the New South Wales State Governor was welcomed to the town of Singleton by a 'native arch', a display of local Aboriginal artefacts bridging the main street with the word 'Welcome' formed out of boomerangs. Just a few years before, the residents of Singleton had petitioned to have the local Aboriginal population removed from the town. The only public display of these artefacts coincided with the official marginalisation—indeed, civic removal—of the people who made them. In the 1920s in Bairnsdale, Victoria, a cairn to the explorer Angus McMillan was knowingly erected over the grave of an Aboriginal leader called 'Bruden Munjee'.

An organisation that was particularly active in commemorating 'the last of the local tribe' was the Australian Natives' Association, a society of the native-born. In much Australian literature, the 'native-born' are not Aborigines. European use of the word 'native'—which in one context could be so derogatory and another so proud—was expressive of the appropriation of indigenous citizenship. 'The ANA was quite explicitly committed to racial exclusivism in Australia, one of its three main objectives in the 1920s being a White Australia.' Members of the Australian Natives' Association fostered a respectful sense of succession through their sponsorship of monuments and were rarely worried by any ambiguity about 'native'. But the Aborigines themselves *were* worried, and briefly formed a *Real* Australian Native Association.

Bernard Smith has described the nineteenth-century tussle between the opposing perceptual conventions of melancholy (often associated with forests and desert) and of hope (sun and sheep). He describes how, in the apparent absence of 'venerable remains of antiquity', the sunny, classical, pastoral vision came to offer an alluring parallel with the lands of antiquity. Woolly flocks and patrician pastures gave historical depth to the landscape and provided an escape from the melancholy glen and the stony desert. The 'phantoms' and 'shadows' could be chased away by the light. From the 1890s well into the twentieth century, sunshine and sheep pervaded the literary and artistic representations of Australia, eventually hardening into images of 'national heritage'. 'The rejection of the melancholy strain in our literature', warns Smith, 'led to a heartiness that was often shallow'.

So the denial of Aboriginal culture was coincident with new ways of seeing the land itself in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her book, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*, Heather Goodall sensitively explores the double vision of the 'white nationalists'. The preservation of national parks and the new appreciation of wild country: these new institutions and visions were, like the literary and artistic works of the time, also denials that the landscape was the creation of its Aboriginal owners.

The collectors of stone tools were, in the early twentieth century, active in erecting stone cairns to European explorers, marking the routes of their journeys across the landscape. As these cairns were unveiled, speeches were made about the need for closer settlement, and local Aboriginal identities, generally described as 'the last of the tribe', were incorporated in the ceremonies. At the same time, these collectors were busy removing the field evidence of Aboriginal occupation and piling up their tens of thousands of Aboriginal stone tools into a sort of memorial cairn to 'the stone age'. While one set of cairns was inventing places for the European imagination, the other cairn was leaching the landscape of Aboriginal meaning, disassembling place. These European land *rites* were most overt in the very period when acknowledgement of the violence and illegitimacy of the European invasion of Australia was most strongly suppressed and denied, and the period when many Aboriginal reserves were revoked, and Kooris and Murris were losing what few land rights they had.

In the early twentieth century, Aboriginal words and symbols were increasingly used to define a white indigenous culture. The group called the 'Jindyworobaks' was formed in Adelaide in the late 1930s and drew inspiration from Aboriginal images and understandings of landscape. The stone tool collectors, in their rejection of the relevance of European developments in field archaeology, in their championing of homegrown originality over 'alien influences', and in their appropriation of Aboriginal meanings, practised a lithic strain of Jindyworobakism. And as early as 1925, the artist Margaret Preston advocated the use of Aboriginal decorative motifs in homes and pub-

lic places and, in promoting an 'indigenous art of Australia', she hoped to rid herself 'of the mannerisms of a country other than my own'. Many collectors and antiquarians encouraged the use of Aboriginal names for landscape features, and adopted Aboriginal pseudonyms in their writing. Some, such as Bob Croll and Alec Chisholm, were members of the Melbourne Savage Club, a 'bohemian' society that playfully exploited and assumed the symbols of indigenous peoples. The artefacts and the words, like the land, were available for possession; they did not have to be fought over or won. The collectors' interest in the culture was as a dead culture, a relic, ornamental culture, a culture that could be picked up, displayed like a trophy, worn or discarded like a coat.

Bob Croll exemplified the self-satisfied conservatism of inter-war Australian establishment culture with its coalition of interests in landscape, Aborigines, painting, collecting artefacts, and country (or 'field') experience. He was born in a Victorian country town, came to the city and spent the rest of his life eulogising the virtues of the bush and a country upbringing. He wrote popular walking books that enticed city folk into the 'open air', and he celebrated and defended the pastoral history of Australia. Croll was also a connoisseur of landscape painting, a champion of the Heidelberg school of artists, an opponent of modernism, and a promoter of the art of Albert Namatjira. He was a founder of the Victorian Aboriginal Group, a study group made up of white Australians who, living in Victoria, saw nothing ambiguous in calling themselves an 'Aboriginal Group'. He was also active in the Anthropological Society of Victoria which, symbolically, met in an anatomy school. Croll was a keen collector of Aboriginal artefacts—as we have seen, he liked 'Hunting the Blackfellow'—and his son Robin helped Murray Black on one of his grave-robbing excursions. In his sixties, Bob Croll discovered Central Australia, an experience that 'quickened' and politicised his interest in Aboriginal culture. Croll visited Central Australia in the company of both artists and scientists and dabbled in two of the emerging forms of white fascination with the Centre, painting and psychology. He was pleased to call himself a 'native', and frequently used the pen-name of 'Barak', the name of a prominent Wurundjeri elder. He was proud of the fact that he had been made a member of the Aranda tribe in Central Australia ('an honorary member, thank goodness—have you ever seen an initiation ceremony?').

John Rickard, in his *Australia: A Cultural History* (1988), has described Australian culture in the half century before the second world war as characterised by 'powerful pressures to conform'. He argues it was a period 'for coming to terms with the Australian condition, and therefore a time for the articulation of rites, codes and customs, while at the same time adapting to the now more insistent intrusions of the modern world' (192). The antiquarians participated in that process: they played out a larger cultural negotiation between the imported and the indigenous, between European intellectual 'modernism' and Australian environmental 'primitivism'. Australians feared a 'half-caste' culture. Yet many also championed an indigenous culture, a white indigenous culture that denied, displaced and sometimes accommodated Aboriginal traditions. The collectors began to regret the impoverishment of their collecting grounds. They came to unexpectedly share, perhaps, a sort of Aboriginal attachment to particular places, often the same type of places, and they experienced an echo of the Aboriginal loss. 'It's curious how persistent is that love of one's native heath', confessed Bob Croll soon before his death, 'I am a very aboriginal in that regard'.

It is very interesting to see in Judith Wright's poetry and prose, as well as in the published reflections of her father, a former Chancellor of Armidale University, a rapid complication of the morality of the frontier, especially from the 1960s. Wright's reworking of her family history, the change of perspective from *The Generations of Men* in 1959 to *The Cry for the Dead* in 1981, illustrates the shift in sensibilities exactly, from elegies for a lost people to the shock of contemporary recognition, from images of ghosts in the paddocks to the reality of a black sister, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, sitting in her kitchen sharing poetry and 'a secret kindness'. Wright remembered that, shortly after she met Oodgeroo, 'something of the reality of my family history began to dawn on me': 'they hadn't told me the land I loved/ was taken out of your hands'. Although, while growing up, she often rode across Bora Paddock and that 'grass-grown ring of earth', she recalled that 'I had scarcely seen an aboriginal in my life'.

This acceptance of Aboriginal survival--a slow, late insight of settler Australians—opened the way also for acceptance of the antiquity of Aboriginal occupation. It was an acknowledgement of them as historical beings. Settlers had for long disparaged any evidence of antiquity, especially those stone tool collectors. Extinction and lack of antiquity were related beliefs; they were both traits of a timeless people. White Australians abandoned them at about the same time. The scientific discovery of Aboriginal antiquity in the 1960s, always deeply known by Aboriginal people themselves, was not just a product of radiocarbon or of archaeological technology, but also awaited these fundamental cultural insights of the European settlers of Australia. Aboriginal time was allowed to stretch, both backwards and forwards, bringing the people themselves confrontingly into the present, and projecting them also into a shared Australian future.

In 1968, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called the white Australian habit of denying the violence and dispossession of the frontier 'the Great Australian Silence' (Stanner 13). The Great Australian Silence, I want to suggest, was often 'white noise'; it sometimes consisted of an obscuring and overlaying din of history-making. We can see it still at work today. But the denial was frequently unconscious, or only half-conscious, and it was also, as I've been trying to illustrate here, part of a genuine attempt by white Australians to foster emotional possession of the land and was sometimes accompanied by respect for pre-existing Aboriginal associations.

It is in this sense that our literature and historiography of the 1990s is unearthing mitigating curiosities in even the most violent and arrogant collectors; we are more willing to see them as complex people as well as representatives of colonialism. We are being shown the frontier in the making and under negotiation, as more than just a sharp, divisive boundary of confrontation and violence. In the wake of the bicentennial party and hangover, we are seeking a more complicated history and a more complicated morality.

Collectors, especially when they collect across cultures, are both friend and foe to the indigenous people, both violators and mediators of their past. A consequence of dispossession is that the old culture often only survives to the extent that it has been appropriated by the new. I finished my book, *Hunters and Collectors*, with the story of Connie Hart, an Aboriginal woman living in south-west Victoria in the 1980s who, late in her life, revived the Aboriginal craft of basket-making in her country. As a child on the Lake Condah mission station, Connie had watched her mother select the grasses and make baskets. This is what Auntie Connie remembers:

> No one taught me to make my baskets. I used to watch my mother do it and when she put her basket down and went outside, I'd pick it up and do some stitches. When I heard her coming back, I would shove it away real quick and run away. I was a great one for sitting amongst the old people because I knew I was learning something just by watching them. But if I asked a question they would say, 'Run away, Connie. Go and play with the rest of the kids.'
>
> They didn't want us to learn. My mum told me that we were coming into the white people's way of living. So she wouldn't teach us. That is why we lost a lot of culture. But I tricked her. I watched her and I watched those old people and I sneaked a stitch or two. (Jackamos and Fowell 74)

Connie didn't make a basket herself until her mother died, over forty years later. She was, in a strange way, freed to rediscover her heritage. She remembered the stitch, she remembered the *puung'ort* grass, but she was 'frightened to do it'. But she did do it, and she taught others to do it. Connie's craft survived because she 'tricked' her mum and her elders. They were trying to protect her from prejudice, from the brand of foreign skills, but she—as children often do—knew better. In the 1980s, Connie wanted to make an eel net, a piece of technology refined by her forebears and one which became a regional specialty, but no one seemed to remember how to do it. So she came to the Museum of Victoria and she looked carefully—like no one else had looked before—at the one in the museum cabinet, the one acquired 80 years before from Lake Condah by a white collector. And she went home and made one herself and it stood as tall as she did. Did we expect—or even dare to hope—that museums might operate in this way?

In many parts of northern Australia today, the opposite process is underway. Because in the north it is often the non-Aboriginal people who come and go and the Aboriginal people who stay, it is the Aboriginal people who operate as the informal custodians of settler heritage. The ruin of an old homestead or the grave of a pastoralist are cared for and remembered by the local Aborigines. They invariably shared the history of these places and it is they who now keep the stories. Historians wanting to record and research the history of white settlement and pioneering in the north find themselves, sometimes to their discomfort, 'asking the Aborigines'.[6]

In 1997 the Australian Prime Minister chose Longreach, Queensland, as the site of his highly publicised consultation with pastoralists about his Ten Point Plan in response to the High Court's Wik judgement. He chose Longreach because it is an acknowledged capital of Queensland's rangelands, but he also chose it for its legendary history, and he *especially* chose it because of its museum. In fact it was a matter of local annoyance that the Prime Minister chose to hold his meeting not in the town itself, but at the museum on the outskirts of town. The Stockman's Hall of Fame is a museum which professionals often regard with scepticism, so consumed is it by legend. The Prime Minister, while he was delivering his speech, no doubt thought he was standing safely outside a monument to monocultural conservatism, but if he had stepped inside the museum he would have found that even *there* there are signs of change in understandings of the frontier.

Although the Hall of Fame remains relatively silent about women, and especially neglectful of the environmental changes brought by pastoralism, efforts have recently been made to better acknowledge the role of Aboriginal labour in the pastoral industry. Just a couple of months before the PM's visit, new displays had been mounted inside which unwittingly contradicted his assertions outside: the new displays draw unmistakable attention to the cross-cultural history of Australia's rangelands. And

hanging above the foyer, visible from all over the museum, is a central image which could almost have come from a Herb Wharton story. Had the Prime Minister looked carefully, it would have struck him as deeply radical. It is a photograph of two stockmen, standing together, looking at one another above the firelight. The figures are only represented as silhouettes, and so both are black, but if you look carefully, you'll realise with a bit of a shock in that setting, that one of the figures is a white stockworker and the other is black. So, riding high above the Stockman's Hall of Fame and overlooking the paddock where the Prime Minister outlined his Ten Point Plan in response to Wik, is a romantic but subversive image of cross-cultural partnership on the pastoral frontier.

This is why the Prime Minister is so out of step with the evolution not just of our law, but also of our sensibilities, and of our literature. He thinks that 'black armband' history is the prevailing fashion—and, in the light of his campaigning, it may have to become so. But in the 1990s, we have actually been moving towards stories that alert us more to cross-cultural collaboration than to conflict, more to assistance than to resistance. This, too, is the trend of the High Court's Wik decision in its emphasis on 'co-existence'. The Prime Minister is missing a historic opportunity; he *wants* to miss an historic opportunity.

Let me finish by giving you an example of the sort of story that the politicians and, sadly, some pastoralists, are turning their backs on today. Judith Wright knew that pastoral Australia would provide telling parables; she knew, too, that it was not just a heritage of one dreamtime but, as she put it in the title of her poem, of 'Two Dreamtimes'.

Once upon a time, an Australian pioneer, a whitefella, invited his family to join him on a large swathe of land in northern Australia. He was anxious, for this was 'frontier country'. The climate was unpredictable, the land was unforgiving, and he had a mortgage. He had only made a few 'improvements' to the land—some fencing, a dam or two—for he was working at the margins in every sense.

There were, for instance, still 'wild blacks' about. And there were the station blacks as well, his pastoral workers. He and other pastoralists in the district had, several years ago, decided to 'let them in', to encourage them into pastoral stations. Working with them was better than warring with them. There was a lot of intelligent self-interest in this policy of 'letting in'; many pastoralists didn't just let them in or merely allow them to remain, they even rounded them up. The benefits were that the Aborigines, once they were made more confident of the survival of their own hunting and spiritual rights on the stations, speared fewer cattle and provided a cheap, easily accessible, less stroppy pool of labour for the pastoralist. Even if they did 'go walkabout' from time to time, they did not run off to the local gold rushes like the white blokes.

For the Aborigines themselves it may have represented their only chance to stay on their land. They were loyal to the land, and many had been born on the stations. If the pastoralist moved, they mostly stayed. In hard times the pastoralist would tell himself he was 'civilising the land'—and also the people. That's something he could offer them, he felt, as a supplement to their low—or non-existent—wages.

Our pioneer pastoralist ran cattle for several years and then the drought hit, the long drought, the one his family would remember as a turning point in their lives. They learned something then that was both wonderful and a bit embarrassing, even private. Their financial losses would have been great, perhaps overwhelming, without the Aborigines. *They couldn't have held the land without them.* It was a sober lesson for civilising white pioneers, and not one to be talked about too much. Many, though

were grateful. And a few put it in writing: 'Without the Aborigines, my losses would have been simply ruinous', confessed one. 'Had it not been for the loyalty and co-operation of the Aborigines themselves, our lot would have been considerably more difficult', wrote another. The moral of the story was a poignant one: the Aborigines and the pastoralists had helped one another stay on 'their' land.

The frontier vouchsafes us many secrets, and this is the greatest of them: the role of Aboriginal labour in the pastoral industry. Is my story, with its satisfying symmetry, a fairy tale? No, it's a true story, but one that often finds no audience. It's an Australian morality tale, and we need to hear it now. If you would like to know more about it, read books like Deborah Bird Rose's *Hidden Histories* (1991), Ann McGrath's *Born in the Cattle* (1987), Darrell Lewis's *A Shared History* (1997), Dawn May's *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry* (1994), Henry Reynolds's *With the White People* (1990), Judith Wright's *The Cry for the Dead* (1981), or Herb Wharton's *Unbranded* (1992). Or go into your local museum, even, now, the Stockman's Hall of Fame. The stories are there, but you can hardly hear them today above the din of 'white noise'. And we must hope that the material evidence for those stories, held in pastoral homesteads and company offices, is not quietly being destroyed.

Historian Peter Read recently argued that the Wik decision is special and unique. Not, though, in the way that the politicians think it is. It is not radical in legal ways, and builds sensibly and predictably on Mabo. It does not threaten any existing, valid interests in pastoral land. It is a radical decision only in its social vision, in its recognition that our future lies in 'sharing the country', and that our past is full of precedent.

In Australia, through both scholarly and popular insights, we are moving towards a positive sense of the frontier as a shared space—and on that frontier, collectors, both private and institutional, played a fundamental and sometimes creative role. The moral complexities of frontier life emerge no more clearly than in their often well-documented motives and strategies. Many collectors stole or bullied artefacts from Aborigines. But it was also more ambiguous than that. Many indigenous objects and crafts were actually generated by the economics of cultural exchange, and Aborigines could gain some fragile power through the patronage of collectors. Tony Swain, in his book *A Place for Strangers*, has argued that

> Aboriginal people in early south-east Australia ... used symbols of European power and culture *not* in attempts to eradicate whites or even merely to overthrow their hegemony, but rather to establish moral relationships within an increasingly immoral world.

In the words of the museum curator Philip Jones, in his superb doctoral thesis about the South Australian Museum, the frontier was 'less a line that separates than a zone that unifies, a zone capable of generating new and potent forms of culture'. But first we have to come to terms with the frontier's inequality of power, its violence—the recent television series entitled *Frontier* was part of that. So was the Mabo judgement. We have to acknowledge, and must never forget, that there was war on the grasslands, and a muted bureaucratic and political war ever since—one that has been revived unhelpfully by the Howard government. But it is important, too, to acknowledge the sharing, the creative tension, that is part of frontier experience. That's what Judith Wright articulates so powerfully. That's what the Wik decision is about. That's the great opportunity it offers black and white Australians. Let's grasp it. Otherwise ours will remain a haunted country and our stories will be ones of anguish and despair.

Author's note: Parts of this talk are drawn from my book, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and further bibliographical references can be found there.

Notes

1 Quoted in Henry Reynolds, *With the White People* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1990), p. 214.
2 Quoted in Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London: Faber, 1987), p.147.
3 Noel Pearson, 'Mabo and the Humanities' in *The Humanities and a Creative Nation: Jubilee Essays*, Ed. D M Schreuder, (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1995), pp. 43-62.
4 G.M. Black to D.J. Mahony, 18 June 1934 and 12 October 1939 in 'Ethnology–Black, G.M., National Museum of Victoria file.
5 G. Murray Black to Sir Colin MacKenzie, Friday 18 October [no year given]. National Museum of Australia Collection.
6 Darrell Lewis and Deborah Bird Rose, 'A Bridge and a Pinch', *Public History Review*, vol. 1 (1992): 26-36.

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