

Bringing Them Home: The Power of Story as Public Discourse

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A story about the past, if well told, could take readers up to the high mountains from where they would see, as it were, all the kingdoms of the world, be aware of the field of the possible in human affairs, and might even catch a glimpse of the direction of the great river of life.

Manning Clark

Stories have an extraordinarily strong power to shape imagination, identity and self-confidence. Told within the context of the family, stories provide children with a sense of belonging and a sense of history. They come to understand who they are and where they fit in. May 1997 saw the publication of one of the most important stories of recent Australian history. It is an immensely powerful, 'well told' story about how tens of thousands of children were denied the opportunity to be part of their family and develop a sense of belonging, culture and identity, because of their skin colour. *Bringing Them Home* documents the effects of the policy of 'breeding out colour' that operated in this country from at least the 1930s until the late 1970s (*Bringing Them Home* 27). It is a tragic story that has the potential positively to shape the imagination, identity and confidence of a nation soon to celebrate the centenary of its Federation. It is a story that some commentators are at pains to discredit and therefore silence. The detractors of this Report apply the rules of evidence to the stories of the witnesses to the Commission and find the stories less than credible.

Before discussing the role of the stories offered in the Report I would like briefly to mention the first court case in Australia in which Aboriginal stories had to compete with white legal practices. In 1969 a consortium of mining companies wanted to mine bauxite on what the Aborigines living at Yirrkala on the Gove Peninsula considered their traditional land. 'The Aborigines sent two bark petitions to members of the Commonwealth Parliament requesting that mining leases not be granted until there had been appropriate consultation' (Brennan 3). The petitions, now proudly displayed in glass cabinets in the Federal Parliament building, failed to influence the government of the day. Consequently a group of traditional owners sued the miners and the Commonwealth government in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory. In that case, now known as the Gove Land

Rights case, the Rirratjingu and Gumatj men broke their tradition and took their holy *rangga*, the sacred emblems of their clan, to Darwin. They gave Sir Richard Blackburn, the white judge hearing the case, a secret audience in order to reveal their evidence to him. The men believed that as an intelligent man Sir Richard would understand the significance of their *rangga*. Blackburn 'appreciated that these objects decorated with coloured bird feathers and woven possum fur were religious in character but he did not find them to be legally persuasive' (Brennan 3). He found against the traditional owners of the land.

The Gove Land Rights case was the beginning of protracted legal battles that culminated in 1992 in what is familiarly known as the High Court's Mabo decision. In that decision the majority of judges ruled, among other things, that Blackburn was wrong in his findings and 'that the old men at Gove with their *rangga* over twenty years before were right' (Brennan 14). Six months after the High Court decision, Mr Roy Marika, the man who had signed the bark petitions and been instrumental in starting the Gove case, died. Sir Edward Woodward paid tribute to Roy Marika saying he was 'really the first person who was able in a clear way to bridge the gap between Aboriginal authority and European understanding' (Brennan 14). This gap 'between Aboriginal authority and European understanding', between Aboriginal stories and western legal principles, seems to me to be at the heart of a heated and divisive debate as to the validity and worth of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Report, *Bringing Them Home*.

The Commission, presided over by Sir Ronald Wilson and Mick Dodson, heard oral and written submissions from 535 Aboriginal people affected by the laws and policies of separation. These submissions were collated and many of them published under the title *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. The Report is a 689 page document, bulky and difficult to handle. It cost \$59.95, roughly four times the cost of a novel. The Australian Government Publishing Service did an original print run of 2000 which sold within days. A further two print runs of 7000 copies also sold quickly. Over 40,000 community guides (abbreviated versions of the report) and 4000 video versions of the report have been produced and distributed or sold and in 1997 Doubleday published a new edition of *The Lost Children* (Van Toorn). Random House, at a time when publishing houses are downsizing their author lists, commissioned books and staff in an attempt to arrest rapidly decreasing profit margins, recognised something in the stories of *Bringing Them Home* that made an abridged version of the Report a worthwhile commercial bet. In March of this year they published *the stolen children: their stories* edited by Carmel Bird. In this book Bird has collated nineteen stories of witnesses to the Commission with comments on and reactions to the Report from a diverse selection of public figures. *The stolen children* retails at \$19.95. By late April, the original print run of over 7000 had sold out and a new print run was being organised.

If *Bringing Them Home* was merely a legal document reporting on a Commission of Inquiry, like so many Commissions of Inquiry in the Australian political landscape, 2000 copies should have easily satisfied public demand for the Report.

Why is this Report so much in demand? Part of its popularity can be attributed to the current heightened level of public debate about Aboriginal land rights, reconciliation and 'Wik'. There is obviously a hunger in some sections of the Australian community to know and understand more about the life experiences of Indigenous Australians. I would argue that if this Report answered that hunger to know with legal argument and statistics, rather than with powerful personal stories, the demand for *Bringing Them Home* would not have been so great. In the words of Sir Ronald Wilson:

I think the secret has been to keep intact the actual words of the storytellers as far as possible in describing the effects of the process. That has built in an enormous capacity in the book itself to compel the reader to be moved by it, because it's almost as if they were listening to the stories themselves. (Wilson 2)

It is the power of the words, the sheer force of the numerous 'well told' stories that rescue *Bringing Them Home* from being yet another dry, legalistic report. It is difficult to put this book down. The nation witnessed a tearful Kim Beazley relate in parliament how he stayed up most of the night reading the Report. Beazley's reaction to the Report is not uncommon. However there is a growing chorus of voices, one could almost call it a conservative backlash, against this document. By the time *the stolen children: their stories* was published in March 1998 it was necessary for Random House to insert an erratum slip inside the front cover stating:

The publisher has been contacted by a party that denies certain allegations made in the Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This party states the Inquiry process did not allow it to respond to the allegations in the Report. The nature of the Inquiry process and of the information sought and provided meant that evidence and submissions could not be tested as thoroughly as would occur in a courtroom. This applies to all the evidence.

And here lies the crux of the backlash. The 'truth' of the stories, the oral autobiographies, told by Aboriginal people to the Commission, is seen by some to be seriously suspect because it has not been tested in a court of law.

I would like briefly to quote a few of the disparaging comments levelled at *Bringing Them Home*. P.P. McGuinness writes that the report:

has shown scant regard for evidence, balance and the credibility of witnesses ... While there is no doubt that many of the witnesses wept when they recalled their childhood, and the hearts of many were wrung, there is more than one cause of adult misery than removal from one's parents. ... While the evidence given by witnesses to the commission cannot be

ignored, neither can it for the most part be checked against other sources of evidence. (McGuinness 17)

Frank Devine writes: 'Harrowing anecdote is used in an attempt to force compliance with the report's recommendations'. He goes on to comment on Sir Ronald Wilson's suggestion that the Canadian government's apology to its native people was a 'great endorsement of our own report on the stolen children' by stating: 'Such impulsive intensity is a reminder of Bertrand Russell's aphorism: "An opinion needs to be held fervently only if it is doubtful or demonstrably wrong"' (Devine 9).

The most concentrated attack on *Bringing Them Home* is Ron Brunton's 'backgrounder' titled 'Betraying the Victims: The "Stolen Generations" Report'. In this paper Brunton denounces the use of 'heart-rending statements from witnesses', and claims that *Bringing Them Home* is among other things, 'a most unworthy and tendentious document' and 'the most intellectually and morally irresponsible report to be presented to an Australian government in recent years' (Brunton 3). Brunton goes so far as to assert that because the Commission did not rigorously check the evidence given by each witness, the Report 'betrays the Aboriginal victims of the past almost as surely as would a report which attempted to deny their experiences completely' (3).

Brunton takes issue with many aspects of the Report. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all of his criticisms (See Manne 15). What I want to explore is the concept that 'truth' can somehow be reached only through rigid legal practice and not through story. If such a proposition is correct what place is there for literature, art and spirituality in informing both an individual and collective consciousness?

Brunton writes:

Because the issues at stake in the 'stolen generations' inquiry are so important, and because these involve a number of matters of ongoing and heated contention, it was imperative that the Inquiry did everything in its power to ensure that its accounts of past practices and its conclusions were beyond any reasonable question. (2)

'Beyond any reasonable question', beyond reasonable doubt. For Brunton, and McGuinness and Devine, unless the rules of evidence are applied to the testimonies of the witnesses, 'the painful experiences which the Inquiry sought to make known could be easily dismissed or ignored, as could their contemporary implications' (2).

The key words operating almost as a mantra throughout Brunton's backgrounder are 'evidence' and 'corroboration'. He is correct in noting that the Report 'does not provide any evidence that the Inquiry attempted to distinguish possibly false or exaggerated claims about experiences and later effects from genuine claims' (5). The power of the witnesses' testimony was such that Sir Ronald Wilson, a conservative lawyer, who has said he was 'privileged' to hear the testimonies, aban-

done what would have been a lifetime's legal training: 'I didn't stop, as a judge would have stopped, to ask where's the corroboration. How could you doubt the authenticity of a story when tears are running down the faces of storytellers?' (5). Brunton finds it:

surprising that Sir Ronald, a former High Court judge, did not seem to realise that by asking 'Where's the corroboration?' and demonstrating that appropriate corroboration had been sought and obtained, he would be strengthening the cases of witnesses and assuring the credibility of the Inquiry's findings.(5)

In a legal sense Brunton's criticism may be valid. Truth in a court of law must depend on more than emotional distress. When questions of genocide and compensation are being examined a more rigorous test of authenticity may be called for, but as Wilson has repeatedly stressed since the publication of *Bringing Them Home*:

We weren't asked to decide whether offences had been committed. We were asked to 'trace the history and record the effects' of a policy by consulting widely and that didn't spell out to us that we were to be like a criminal court testing evidence ... We made it our business not to probe because these people were distressed enough to simply record it and we were about simply telling a story, not pursuing retribution ... we thought it was the best way to go and to simply tell a story that would move the Australian community to heal the nation ... (Wilson 3)

The Commissioners 'were convinced after hearing from so many that the telling of stories was a very important part of the human process' (Wilson 2). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and the Chilean National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation have also stressed the importance of allowing those who have been oppressed or abused to tell their stories in the public arena. It is the act of storytelling and of being listened to which begins the process of healing and reconciliation. For many of the witnesses to the Commission, it was the first time they had told the stories of their painful past. They told a Commission established by a white government how they had been abducted and abused by legal and religious figures of white authority.

What is the role of stories? Stories, fictional and non-fictional, operate to inform, stimulate, challenge and enlarge the imaginative vision of their listener or reader. Powerful stories work on the imagination. I want to stress the word *imagination* for unless non-Indigenous Australians can attempt to imagine the pain and suffering of the stolen children – and I do not think that it is possible for most of us to have much of an idea of that pain and suffering – we cannot progress very far along the path of healing and reconciliation that all Australians need. By publishing the 'actual words of the storytellers as far as possible in describing the effects of the

process', *Bringing Them Home* has afforded its readers an opportunity to imagine and thereby understand a previously little-known aspect of the life experiences of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Martin Flanagan has written that Charles Dickens is the only writer who:

come[s] close to capturing the scale of the experience of the Stolen Generation ... Because of Dickens, and a few people like him, we cannot think of Victorian England without summoning images of the urban poor – particularly the children. What we need in this country is an artist with similar largeness who can implant the story of the Stolen Generation, or a member thereof, in the Australian imagination. (Flanagan 161)

I would argue that, through its use of stories, *Bringing Them Home* has 'implant[ed] the story of the Stolen Generation ... in the Australian imagination'. Stories of Aboriginal children being forcibly separated from their parents have been told in the past but Australians as a nation were largely unaware of them. The works of Mudrooroo and Jack Davis, though they tell stories of Aboriginal displacement, cultural and spiritual destruction and the continuing importance of the past in the present, have failed to capture the imagination of Australians as *Bringing Them Home* has. The only Aboriginal story that would have a comparable readership to the Report is Sally Morgan's *My Place*, a fictionalised autobiography.

In 1842 Richard Windeyer, a prominent member of the Sydney bar, gave a public lecture in which he attacked traditional Aboriginal society and the notion that Aborigines had any rights to the land of Australia. Despite his tightly reasoned defence of Aboriginal dispossession his conscience remained troubled. He concluded his speech with two questions: 'How is it our minds are not satisfied? ... What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?' (Reynolds 21). Some of the power of the Report can be attributed to a sense, on the part of many non-Indigenous Australians, of this 'whispering in our hearts', a sense that we should have known or even that maybe somehow on some level we did know and did nothing about it. This sentiment is captured in Senator Rosemary Crowley's statement:

For me the 1970s is not a very long time ago. I find it absolutely shocking to read these stories and to somehow know that, while I did not know as a child, I had a faint idea, I suppose, as a doctor in South Australia in the 1960s. (Crowley 133)

The power of story cannot be denied when one considers that Aboriginal lore and tradition have survived 40,000 years through the act of storytelling. One of the main recommendations of the Report was the need to establish an Aboriginal Oral History archive in which all the stories already told and those yet to be told, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people affected by the policies of separation, could be gathered together as 'a memorial to the Stolen Children'.

Public storytelling and Australian history

History is a narrative that remembers and celebrates some stories and forgets or represses others. Robert Hughes, writing on Australian attitudes to history at the time of the Australian Centenary, states that 'the obsessive cultural enterprise of Australians a hundred years ago was to forget [their own history] entirely, to sublimate it, to drive it down into unconsulted recesses'. Hughes quotes a "Centennial Song" published in the Melbourne *Argus* [which] struck the right note of defensive optimism, coupling it with an appeal to censor early Australian history – or, preferably, not write it at all':

Is it manly, fair or honest with our early sins to stain
 What we aimed at, worked for, conquered – aye – an honest, noble name?
 And those scribes whose gutter pleasure is to air the hideous past,
 Let us leave them to the loathesome mould in which their mind is cast.
 Look ahead and not behind us! Look to what is sunny, bright –
 Look into our glorious future, not into our shadowed night.
 (qtd in Hughes 597)

The sentiments of this 'Centennial Song' are echoed today by those views which see the acknowledgment and examination of policies that resulted in a significant destruction of Aboriginal identity and culture as a 'black armband' view of history. In our current conservative political climate there seems to be a concern that the telling of new stories, in this case new only because they have not been extensively voiced before, will somehow deface or dishonour the stories that are already woven into our dominant culture.

At the State funeral of Ted Matthews, the last surviving Australian soldier of those who stormed the beaches at Anzac Cove at Gallipoli on the morning of April 25 1915, the Prime Minister said that the story of the bravery, sacrifice and heroism of Australian soldiers is the story we must tell our children. He is right. However, on the same day that John Howard made that statement, it was announced that his government would offer no official apology to the stolen children. There is and must be an Indigenous history of Australia and a non-Indigenous history of Australia. These histories, though they sometimes intersect and overlap, remain distinct and separate. They are not competing narratives, they are narratives that speak to each other. For too long Australian history has operated as some form of palimpsest that allows Aboriginal history to surface only when the history of non-Indigenous Australia has been scratched away. Chris Healy has noted that:

For a long time Aboriginal history in Australia was an impossibility. Aborigines were allowed to have myths, for myth is one of the markers of the primitive, but history they had not. History was both the product and the (self) contemplation of European civilisation manifest in south-

ern regions. True knowledge of the past was knowledge of white Australia reserved for white Australians. (Healey 50)

The existence of Aboriginal history can no longer be denied. Much of that history has come through stories, not legally proven stories, but stories that express the truth of Aboriginal beliefs and experience. Ruby Langford Ginibi has said of her writing:

I want to store all this knowledge about my mob here so that we don't get left out of the next lot of history ... I'm not interested in writing fiction ... I'm too busy writing the truth about my people. (Ginibi qtd in Little 108–9)

Non-Indigenous Australian history has, over the last twenty years, begun to acknowledge and examine what Bernard Smith has referred to as 'the locked cupboard of our history': the continuing repression of the story of the massacres of Aboriginal people by white settlers (Smith 10). *Bringing Them Home* goes some way towards uncovering and explaining a more recent chapter of Aboriginal history. There remains a large aspect of the stolen children's story that has not been told and will probably never be told and that is the story of the mothers who had their babies and children taken from them. Despite Brunton's claim that the Commission consciously gave 'greater prominence to the negative accounts' (Brunton 6) and that they 'stacked the cards' (Brunton 11), Link-Up (NSW), in their submission to the Inquiry, stated that:

In preparing this submission we found that Aboriginal women were unwilling and unable to speak about the immense pain, grief and anguish that losing their children had caused them. That pain was so strong that we were unable to find a mother who had healed enough to be able to speak and to share her experience with us and with the Commission. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 212)

Western culture has assumed and reinforced a distinction between history as a story informed by facts and verifiable by empirical truths, and myth as a story that portrays a more imaginative form of truth. At one end of the spectrum critics like Brunton seem to argue that the facts of history must be verifiable 'beyond reasonable question' before they are to be believed. At the other end of the spectrum poststructuralists would argue that there can never be truth, only perspectives.

But there are some 'truths' more valid than others. These are moral truths and one of them is that thousands of Aboriginal children and their families suffered immense pain and suffering due to 'discriminatory, callous and humiliating policies and practices of the past' (Brunton 19). To argue that stories cannot convey moral truths is to deny the important role literature, and the biggest best seller of stories, the Bible, have had over the centuries in shaping the imagination, behaviour and moral codes of a large percentage of humanity.

Non-Indigenous Australia is a young country currently grappling with crucial questions of its sense of identity, history and independence as a nation. Unless we look hard at *all* the stories of our past we will never reach the stage of self-acceptance and maturity necessary to build a confident nation. Non-Indigenous Australians need to hear the history of Aboriginal possession and dispossession in this land. We should not be afraid of hearing conflicting stories: 'When just one way of telling the story is permitted we call it, quite rightly, censorship' (Finch 7). As we approach the centenary of Federation, the beginning of a new millennium and a referendum on becoming a Republic, the time is long overdue to acknowledge the full history of white settlement and legal practices of this land.

This country was settled on the legal fiction of *terra nullius*. In 1989, in the Queensland Supreme Court, Eddie Mabo challenged this white man's fiction with his own story of family adoption and property rights. Mr Justice Moynihan, the white judge hearing the case, found Mabo's evidence less than convincing. If Brunton's rules had been applied, Eddie Mabo's story would not ultimately have led to the High Court declaring that the doctrine of *terra nullius* was null and void. Through Mabo's determination to have his story heard, a new form of 'truth' was established.

In September 1997 artists from the same clan that sent the bark petitions to Canberra in 1963 exhibited their works at the Museum of Contemporary Art in an exhibition titled 'Native Title: Yirrkala Bark Paintings'. The exhibition described the relationship between the Aboriginal people of North-East Arnhem Land (Yolngu) and their traditional land. The brochure that accompanied the exhibition stated that the art works were another example in a history of 'examples of the Yolngu belief that by revealing sacred designs to the Balanda [non-Aboriginal] people, mutual understanding and respect for the Yolngu law will be advanced'.

Bringing Them Home, by remaining faithful to the words of the witnesses to the Commission, is a living, breathing petition. Those who told their stories to the Commission are alive and hurting. Their stories are living memory not ancient history. To argue, as Brunton does, that the Report should be dismissed because it provides no corroboration of the evidence given and no 'numerical summary data' is to lock that petition away in a glass cabinet (Brunton 9). Large numbers of the Australian public have shown, however, that they wish to engage with that petition now and not twenty years hence.

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- ¹Dispossession here applies to cultural, spiritual and familial dispossession, not just the dispossession of land/country.