Re-thinking Aboriginal History: Self-concept for a Nation

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It has been said that history is written by the victors and this is certainly true of the Australian experience over the last 215 years, as regards Indigenous history. Early history has largely been written from ethno-centric perspectives with writers believing they were witnessing the dying embers of an almost extinct society. Many writers had no intimate knowledge of Indigenous society and as such their writings often misrepresented the whole foundation of Indigenous society by their recordings of what they found interesting and ignoring those aspects of our society we consider central. Aboriginal history research still seems to be carried out largely by non-Indigenous academics with only small-scale focused studies that are often ‘one-shot’ in nature undertaken by Aboriginal researchers who are usually fulfilling the requirements of tertiary education. Aboriginal history research still tends to follows existing methodologies rather than developing new synergistic methodologies. The purpose of this presentation is to: provide a rationale for rethinking Australia’s Aboriginal history from an Indigenous perspective; present a new dynamic holistic model for reconceptualising the analysis of and value of Aboriginal history that incorporates past, present and future perspectives; and advocate stronger methodological approaches to the study of Aboriginal history.

Introduction

It has been said that history is written by the victors and this is certainly true of the Australian experience over the last 215 years, as regards Indigenous history. Early history has largely been written from ethno-centric perspectives with writers believing they were witnessing the dying embers of an almost extinct society. Many writers had no intimate knowledge of Indigenous society and as such their writings often misrepresented the whole foundation of Indigenous society by their recordings of what they found interesting and ignoring those aspects of our society we consider central. These earlier writings were mostly negative in their interpretations of Indigenous histories and our social lifestyles of the times. Nothing really positive was ever written. Indigenous society during that time stood in their ways, especially in regards to competition for land and other natural resources. Early writings indicated that our people had no structured land and water management practices, no social, political and religious affiliations. The majority of earlier Australian history writers then would probably never met or spoke with an Indigenous person or group. Men like Dawson, Howitt, Mathews, Fawcett, Curr, Cunningham and Breton who wrote on my people, the Wonnarua who inhabited and still inhabit the Hunter Valley region of this country, during the eighteen hundreds, never had an intimate knowledge of my people. Nor were any of them a trained anthropologist or archaeologist and as such they relied on hearsay evidence from informers many of whom would have only portrayed a negative imagery of the Wonnarua. This raises considerable doubts about the accuracy of what they wrote. Earlier writers never wrote about what land meant to my people or the complexities of traditional Indigenous lifestyles. Because of land competition, they had no alternatives but to write what they did. What else could they have written? As non-Indigenous histories of our peoples now tell us and it is forever being ‘rammed down our throats’, that it was they who brought “civilization” to this country, it was they who brought the knowledge and technical know how, it was they who brought their beasts of burden and it was they who brought their religious teachings and
moral ethics, and it was they who brought the concept of time to this land and time pivoted around everything that they did. These historic negative non-Indigenous perspectives of our people underscored the development of government policies of protection, segregation and separation that resulted in my people being treated in a loco parentis manner based on misguided and supposedly well intentioned purposes. It also goes without saying that Aboriginal history research still seems to be carried out largely by non-Indigenous academics with only small-scale focused studies that are often ‘one-shot’ in nature undertaken by Aboriginal researchers who are usually fulfilling the requirements of tertiary education. Aboriginal history research still tends to follows existing methodologies rather than developing new synergistic methodologies. The purpose of this paper is to: provide a rationale for rethinking Australia’s Aboriginal history from an Indigenous perspective; present a new dynamic holistic model for reconceptualising the analysis of and value of Aboriginal history that incorporates past, present and future perspectives; and advocate stronger methodological approaches to the study of Aboriginal history.

The Historical and Continuing Misrepresentation of Indigenous History

A History of Omission and Error in the Writing of Australia’s History

Australian history up to the 1970s has been characterized by a history of omission of reference to Indigenous Australians. Previous to the 1970s, western academic scientific recordings of Indigenous existence through the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology and linguistics were the most common forms of research and writings about Indigenous peoples. Most writings were esoteric in nature with academics writing to impress other academics to gain whatever “kudos” they could for the tertiary institutions they researched for and for their own academic standings in whatever the disciplines they researched.

Australian history, as we know it was primarily based on the concepts of introduced technologies, attitudes and social values which came with the first fleet, manifesting itself chronologically with the physical and social changes which have shaped this country since invasion times. Non-Indigenous historians glorified the heroic epic journeys of “discovery” by their explorers and settlers which paved their ways into the unknown interiors of this land thereby opening up vast rich fertile grazing lands for their cattle and sheep and to exhaust whatever natural resources they happened upon. They wrote of the “great political events” which also shaped this country, their founding fathers of social reform, glorified Australia’s inclusion in wars and lionized certain individual sports teams, men and women. These events were in many instances utilized as compulsory components of the education systems throughout this country and generations of Australians were socialized only with these histories. Australian history was White in its content, White in its structure and White in its delivery.

To imply that Australia also has a Black history, with Black in its content, Black in its structure and Black in its delivery would go against the grain of what many generations of non-Indigenous Australians were indoctrinated with. The late historian Manning Clark in a 1954 lecture on Australian history spoke of the ethnocentric bias that largely dominated Australian history writings at the time that it was the conviction of the majority of educated people in Australia that: "British political institutions and the Protestant Religion were the creators of political liberty and material progress that men and women studied that area not as a discipline or a diversion of the mind, but because such a study would reveal to them the secrets of political liberty and material progress"(Cavanagh, 1999, p. 150). The “Great Australian Silence” (Stanner, 1968, p. 18) as Stanner termed it then highlighted the literary
omissions of Indigenous history from mainstream Australian history. An anthropologist by profession, Stanner in his Boyer Lecture of 1968 lists a group of Australian historians of the post war generations by measuring their inability to include Indigenous history into their writings. Stanner (1968, p. 3) noted that Hartley Grattan’s *Introducing Australian* (1942) only mentioned Indigenous content in one sentence of its 300 pages, Brian Fitzpatrick’s, *The Australian People* (1946) in its 260 pages mentioned Indigenous content on one or two pages, and in George Caiger’s, *The Australian Way Of Life* (1953) the word “aboriginal” is only found once. He also noted that Harris in his book *Australia In The Making: A History* (1948) wrote about Dampier, Banks, Cook and Sturt but that is where the history of Australia ended. These writers of Australian history did not have to divulge why they omitted Indigenous Australian history content from their writings. They were writing about Australia’s history as they believed it to be, and Australian history in their eyes was only their history. Their works were expected to highlight the Australian “ethos” of those times and they did just that. They were historians of their times who brought home the expectations of their times. It was generally accepted that Australia had only one history and this filtered through the decades of the 1950s, 60s and early 70s. As Manning Clark (1980, p. 47) has acknowledged:

On that question I began with my mind filled with the prejudices of my generation. For my generation there were two great questions for a historian to answer: the first was why the Aborigines had made no progress from barbarism to civilization during the twenty to thirty thousand years of their residence in this country before the coming of white men; the second was why the Aborigines, having been deprived of their way of life by white men, were not able to adapt themselves to any other way of life - that is why they copied the vices and not the virtues of what white men had to offer. My prejudice, shared with other members of my generation, was that there was only one culture in Australia - European culture; only one way of life - the transplanted European way of life.

**The Dawn of a New Australian History**

In the mid 1970s a whole new breed of non-Indigenous historians and writers on Indigenous history and social issues began to emerge. People like Henry Reynolds, Bob Reece, Peter Read, Jean Woolmington, Lyndall Ryan, Bain Attwood, Keith Willey, Dianne Barwick and Faye Gale. Many of these writers wrote about for the first time: the richness and diversities of Indigenous Australian culture, the “blood and guts” stories of culture clash, and culture conflicts of the “out of control frontier periods” and no doubt these stories needed to be told. They also wrote of the deplorable social conditions Indigenous Australians had experienced in the past by draconian state and federal government policies of protection, segregation, separation, forced assimilation and institutionalization. As such, many of these writers have educated and sensitized Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians about aspects of Australia’s Indigenous histories never before published until the last thirty years. They also encouraged Australians to want to address the legacies still evident when they put pen to paper. These writers began to wake Australians to the fact that Australia has always had a black history and as a result for some Australians a new meaning of Australian history and a new self-concept for a nation was at last beginning to surface. However, when Indigenous historians and writers become as prolific in their research and writings, as the former then hopefully more factual versions of Indigenous Australian history will emerge. Histories of finding out your traditional group and clan, contact with the invaders, frontier conflict, a period of demoralization, and disease, an adjustment period, contact with missionaries and the days of the Protection and Welfare Boards, school exclusions, forced removal to reserves, and the abduction of children. Miller, (1985, p.227) For this to happen, Indigenous historians need to become more confident in their research and writings. This is what Black history is
all about. Australian research funding bodies should become more Indigenous user friendly for Indigenous researchers to access what they have been denied to a large degree and that is the opportunity to research aspects of our own histories and social concerns.

The Under-Representation of Indigenous Historians and Writers

The educational experiences of the majority of Indigenous Australians have been fragmented and sporadic in nature. Most state education systems had differing at times but similar in many ways, policies for educating and teaching Indigenous children. The New South Wales state education system, during the 1880s, had developed policies of exclusion, (see Cook, 1995). segregation and separation within its the education structures, even training Indigenous children to a year three level only. These policies ensured generations of Indigenous people were far less educated than other Australians. However by the late 1970s, a greater influx of Indigenous people were attending tertiary institutions and were gaining the skills it took to put pen to paper and by the mid 1980s Indigenous people began writing down their own stories. Their works were mainly biographical, highlighting what is was like growing up under a totalitarian existence living on government reserves controlled by petty government bureaucrats called mission managers. They wrote of restrictions of their movements, the stealing of their children, and forced low paid labour. They also wrote of the happier times, their interaction with the bush, large extended family relationships, their memories of their parents, grandparents and the influences they had on their lives. Some wrote in glowing terms of these events and some did not. Many people who are no longer with us today, like Bill Cohen, Ida West, Ella Simons, Shirley Smith (Mum Shirl), Charles Perkins and Kevin Gilbert have had works published along these lines. From the 1980s and early 1990s another group of Indigenous writers began to emerge. They were younger, far more educated, articulate and competent in many writing skills and they were eager to tell their stories. People like Sally Morgan, Marcia Langton, Gary Foley, Bobby Sykes, Anita Heiss, John Moriarty and Gordon Briscoe. These works are more scholarly in content and structure and many are on par with any non-Indigenous writings. However, some publishers, certain academics, and social commentators have dismissed many examples of Indigenous writings as playing on the heart strings of white Australia, using a “black arm band” approach to Indigenous history, and instilling and inflicting guilt for what has happened in the history of Black and White relationships in this country. They believe that we should forget the past and move on as if what happened, never happened. Try telling White Australia to forget Anzac Day and see the responses. Indigenous Australians need to contribute much more to documenting our history, writing the wrongs of our past in an open and honest way and letting all Australians know that there is a Black history of this country. Or are certain sections of this country afraid of what will come out of Indigenous people writing about our own history. In the words of the late Kevin Gilbert, "perhaps they feel that whites can do it better? Or are they afraid that too accurate a Black view will come through” (Gilbert, 1973, p.viii).

The Continuing Problematic Paradigm

Indigenous Australians are the most researched group of people in this country. Academics have dealt with just about every aspect of our lives. Archaeologists have dug, measured, recorded and drawn. Anthropologists have observed, written, compared and hypothesised, while linguists have listened, tape-recorded, structured and transcribed. There just seems to be a never ending supply of information about Indigenous Australians researched by countless people both nationally and internationally and this is problematic. Problematic in the context of our history and issues affecting us, are still pretty much controlled by non-Indigenous researchers, research funding bodies and academic institutions. Problematic in the
fact that Indigenous researchers are forced to validate their own histories by what was previously researched by their non-Indigenous counterparts. Problematic with the fact that this will not change unless well thought out structures are implemented, which will see future Indigenous researchers compete on a more equitable basis for research funding. The current system places Indigenous society in a position whereby it is only receiving scant and sporadic crumbs off the research funding table while non-Indigenous society eats up the bulk of it. There are a few examples where some Indigenous research organizations have procured large funding but these are few and far between and usually end up with Indigenous academics only talking to other Indigenous academics. This is not conducive for the future of Indigenous research. Partnerships between strong Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers need to be forged so that we can learn from each other and truly share Australian history. Governments also need to seriously consider addressing funding in relation to Indigenous issues. Currently it can be said that not only are Indigenous researchers not being afforded access to research funds, highly competent research teams that comprise a collaboration of leading Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations and individuals find that research proposals put to the Australian Research Council cannot attract funding when the research is clearly Aboriginal anything in focus. Given we are the most educationally and socially disadvantaged group in Australia today this seems counter strategic (Aboriginal history, education, or issues were not even mentioned as one of the government’s national research priorities) and one has to wonder what is really going on.

A Rationale for the Development of New Synergistic Methodologies

Traditionally, historians have relied on the validity of primary data and have been cautious when citing secondary data sources and generating historical analysis there from. However it needs to be considered that such a methodology historically originates from non-Indigenous perspectives, and negates Indigenous primary sources. Whilst non-Indigenous historians have assumed that the primary data they have gathered reflects the historical period of their times, their views have been underpinned by Euro-centric perspectives. The vast majority of Australian history has been written from the perspective of non-Indigenous historians many of whom who have not even considered attempting to view Australian history through Indigenous perspectives. As such the primary data sources they have grounded this version of history upon primarily derive from non-Indigenous sources. To a certain extent this reflects the available resources that are widely available and valued from a White cultural frame of reference. While such primary resource materials are invaluable resources, given they derive primarily from non-Indigenous perspectives, the internal validity of such studies is questionable. Whilst qualitative research methodologies today advocate triangulation techniques to test the reliability and validity of qualitative data sources, historians have not as yet developed sophisticated scientific analysis techniques to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the results reported. Importantly, I know of no attempts to triangulate data from either Indigenous or non-Indigenous historians that has been utilized to identify areas of congruence and dissonance. More importantly, the disciplines focus on primary non-Indigenous recorded data sources can only be considered a Euro-centric version of Australian history. It never ceases to amaze me, that despite stronger methodological sources that advocate triangulation of tests of the validity of data from different perspectives, the historian, be they Indigenous or non-Indigenous seem to over rely on one source of primary data. Whilst non-Indigenous historians seem to rely upon primary data sourced from non-Indigenous Australians without attempting to articulate this data in comparison to Indigenous view points, Indigenous historians have often solely utilised oral history data. Yet to fully document Australian history both sources of primary data need to sourced and compared to
identify areas of congruence and dissonance in two culturally disparate primary data sources.

**A Theoretical Model for Re-thinking History**

It needs to be better appreciated that history is valuable in of itself but it is also a means by which we can better understand the present and more importantly utilize as a foundation for shaping the future (see Craven, 1999 for an overview of why history matters). Traditionally historians have focused on reporting past events rather than critically applying such understandings to inform analysis of present day society or to predict and shape preferred futures. This seems to be unfortunate as historians are well versed in the lessons of the past and are intimately familiar with how the past has shaped the present. Such knowledge could also be invaluable for informing the prediction of and shaping the future.

The truth about Australia's history has to become more actively shared and more widely known (see Craven, 1999). The popularisation of Eurocentric views through our history and the omission of Indigenous Australians from our history have perpetuated misconceptions about Indigenous Australia. Australians need to reconceptualise the structure and representation of our history to ensure Australians are taught the truth about our past and comprehend how our history has adversely impacted on Indigenous Australians and some aspects of community attitudes today. As discussed above, Australian history has largely been written by non-Indigenous historians, critical perspectives of Indigenous historians have only emerged recently, yet in order to tell the truth Indigenous and other Australians need to share Australian history. The fundamental critical importance of history needs to be expounded as is the importance of telling the truth to Australians in order to ensure history contributes to making a real difference to reconciliation and social justice in Australian society.

Figure 1 is a theoretical model which aims to reflect a holistic approach to reconceptualizing history. Three circle figures are depicted in an interconnected model to demonstrate the interactive nature of the three circles - present, past and futures perspectives. Futures perspectives are placed at the top of the model to denote the important role of history in informing predictions of preferred futures and therefore assisting to shape such a future. The central arrow demonstrates that all aspects of the model need to be examined in the context of local, State/Territory and national perspectives of history.

The model is based on the premise that in order to appreciate Indigenous culture and issues today, Australians need to understand the impact of history upon Indigenous Australian societies. Finding out how today's society was affected by past perspectives ensures Australians can understand how society today came to be what it is. Therefore understanding the events and forces that have shaped Indigenous societies and issues today is the basis for understanding the present. Understanding both the past and present serves as foundation for predicting and shaping more equitable futures.

The present perspectives circle depicts the need for historians to appreciate Indigenous culture and issues today and understand how these have been shaped by history. No historian can help to address current issues if they are not aware of the nature of present society and the issues faced.

The past perspectives circle denotes the importance of thoroughly examining historical perspectives. It needs to be more widely appreciated that pre-invasion, invasion and post-invasion history comprise the key historical periods that have shaped present society. Currently
most histories overly focus on one period history and therefore do not present the full range of Indigenous history and experience. Dreamings and the nightmare of invasion and colonisation need to be seen together as the full Indigenous history. In the past there has also been an over emphasis on pre-invasion history - as safely remote in time and space, and nothing to do with Indigenous people and issues now - rather than articulating history to also incorporate invasion and post-invasion history so that today's society can be understood in the light of all that has happened in the past. Aspects of history topics could benefit by not being solely explored in isolation, but related to present and future perspectives as depicted by the overlapping nature of the circles in the model so that past events are critically analysed to show their impact on Indigenous societies today. Such knowledge can then be utilised as a basis for shaping preferred futures.

Figure 1: A Theoretical Model for Re-thinking Indigenous History
The futures perspectives circle reflects the need for a real new partnership between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians. Historians can help this need to be addressed by contributing to predicting and thinking about how to create more equitable outcomes in Australian society.

The interaction of all elements of the model - present, past and future - leads to understanding the importance of history in helping to inform how all Australians can share in social, political and economic justice. Throughout the model, the interactive nature stresses that history needs to be developed in tandem in a holistic way to explore present, past and futures perspectives rather than to isolate each area. This approach leads to a focus on understanding society today rather than solely a 'content' approach and prepares the foundation for history to contribute to creating better futures for all Australians.

Summary

In summary this article has attempted to advocate that we need to rethink Australia’s Indigenous history. A rationale was provided for rethinking Australia’s Indigenous history from an Indigenous perspective. A new dynamic holistic model for re-thinking the analysis and value of Indigenous history that incorporates past, present and future perspectives was presented. It was also advocated that stronger methodological approaches to the study of Indigenous history need to be considered. Australia is a far better place than it once was for her Indigenous peoples but not as yet as good as it might become. History has a potentially vital role in helping to shape an Australia we can all share in and be proud of.

References


