

Black Australians Watch and Wait

Raymond Evans

Earlier this year, on SBS television's *Australian Mosaic* series,* I watched black activist and author Robert Bropho travelling across from the Western Australian mainland to Rottnest Island, once a detention centre for Aborigines under colonial rule and now a local holiday resort. I watched Bropho as he tried in vain to discover some recorded hint, some recognition that his people had suffered so much and that so many—more than 500 of them—had perished here. But there was nothing. The place where the prison barracks had been was now a mini-golf course, and the black prisoners' cemetery was merely a levelled camping ground, with a roadway running across it, for the convenience of happy holiday-makers. There was no perception among these care-free people of what had happened here and,

*SBS is the Special Broadcasting Service, a state multicultural network for non-Anglos.

indeed, *no concern to know*. Bropho wandered—a conspicuous black presence, looking oddly out of place—through the crowds of white sea and sunbathers, watching for the spirits of his ancestors, unacknowledged, also moving silently amongst them.

Seeing this, I wondered—as a frustrated historian—if we will ever shift the bland imperturbability of average white Australians towards a confrontation with the realities of their past in this land, the painful truth of what has happened here in the winning and losing of it. And I wondered, too, if there was any other nation on this planet which possessed the monumental insensitivity and the cool insolence to construct a playground upon a death camp. (Perhaps somewhere there is; but that surely cannot excuse the terrible sin of obliteration which such an act embodies.)

Was Rottnest, perhaps, I thought, a pristine symbol of the Bicentennial, which has largely encouraged Australians neither to ponder, to sorrow nor to commemorate, but rather to party mindlessly across what indigenes would term “the country of our bones.”¹ No wonder the historian Roger Milliss, during an academic debate on Australian History and the Bicentennial earlier this year, stated in a barely controlled outburst that black history and invasion history needed to be “ram[med]...down the throats’ of white Australians to try to bring them to their collective senses.”²

For my own part, Bropho's odyssey dramatically called to mind a similar act of obliteration played out much closer to home. On Fraser Island, at Bogimbah Creek between 1897 and 1904, hundreds of Queensland Murris*, forcibly removed in small groups from dozens of tribal areas across the colony and state, were incarcerated; and almost 200 died there, from mal-administration, malnutrition, sickness and plain broken-heartedness. It was the Queensland

*The term Aborigines use to describe themselves.

government's first reserve experiment under the notorious 1897 Act. Of the 117 survivors transported north to Fitzroy Island, as the institution dissolved in chaos, only 25 remained alive in 1910. “How these people pass their time I cannot imagine,” reported the Cairns police magistrate that year. “I don't know whether to laugh or cry at what I saw there.” A year later, only “some ten or so” were left. Yet, again, there is no monument, no cairn of commemoration, to these dispossessed people today on either of these islands where, like Rottnest, the holiday-goers throng. The graveyards of Bogimbah Creek were simply erased.³

At Fraser and Rottnest islands, and at all places inbetween where Aboriginal land rights are still denied, the act of dispossession continues in 1989, as does the accompanying act of white memory-bank erasure. The Bicentennial year of 1988 was rich in telling black and white contrasts. Blacks throw mourning wreaths into the ocean from which the “Tall Ships” were greeted by a million white celebrators. Dazzling pyrotechnical bursts of pure white joy exploded above Sydney Harbour, beside which black artists from Arnhem Land erected 200 burial poles—“one for each of the 200 years since the invasion of Aboriginal Australia.” As Ramingining Artists Community Adviser John Mundine described this exhibition, launched at the first site of white occupation;

Originally being living trees, the Aboriginal memorial is like a forest—an Aboriginal artistic vision of the landscape. Each hollow log is ceremonially a bone coffin, so in essence...the forest is really...a war cemetery, a war memorial to all those Aborigines who died defending their country. The poles were commissioned to represent the 200 years of white contact and black agony...⁴

White Australians, of course, are very fond of erecting war memorials, but apart from the Kalkadoon obelisk at Kajabbi, near Mt. Isa, there are no cenotaphs which commemorate the tens of thousands who fell in the Anglo-

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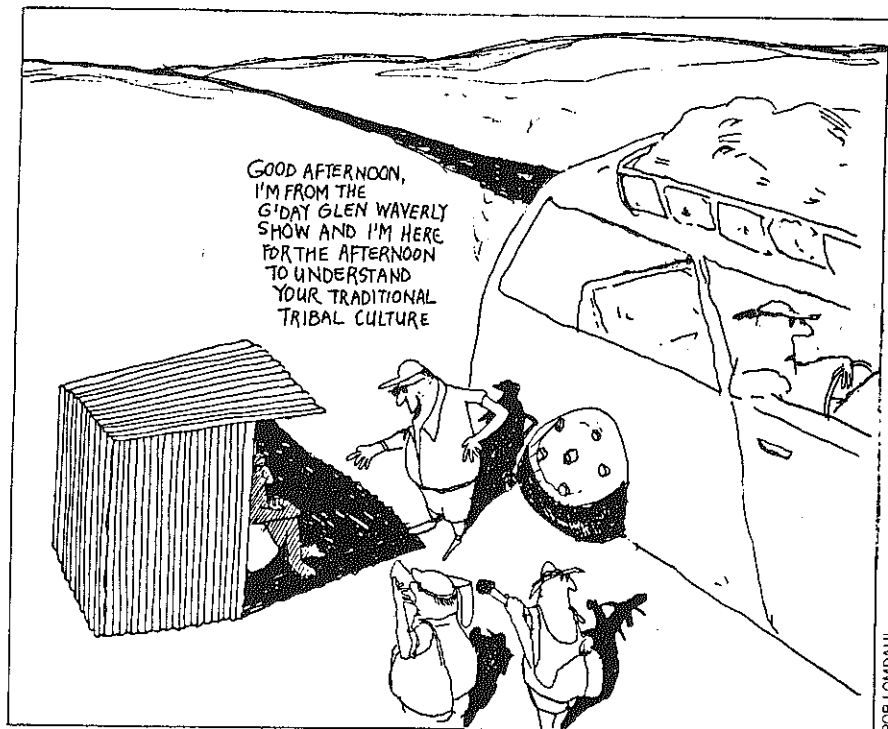
Aboriginal land wars of Australia.

Aboriginal people have faced and survived a disease frontier as well as firearms and chemical warfare frontiers. They have survived the enforced segregation and assimilation experiments of the post-frontier era; the nuclear testing frontier of the fifties and the mineral resources frontier of the transnationals since that time. And they have never ceased to struggle against their dispossession. As the frontier war in Central Australia wound down in the 1930s, urban and rural protests by the dispossessed were escalating. In a chapter of *Staining the Wattle*, published in August 1988, Heather Goodall recalls the Cumeragunja strike on the Murray in 1939; Wanggumara walkout from Brewarrina in 1941—a 190-mile trek to regain their territory; the Pilbera pastoral strike of 1946-9, so movingly recreated recently in the documentary *How the West was Lost*, and the spirited Palm Island resistance of 1956.⁵ In the same volume, Gary Foley reminds us of how the Gurinji in 1966 struck against Vestey's of Wave Hill for nine years until they obtained their land rights objectives.

"Nine years!" writes Foley:

[Vincent] Lingiari showed Australians that Aboriginal people could stand up. Not only that, he showed black Australians that if they stood up for themselves, it didn't matter how long it took or how much struggle they had to go through, they could win.⁶

Are black Australians winning in 1989? On the white side of the picture, the signs are muddled: A white federal government, which reneged on its land rights commitments in 1984, offers through consultation at Barunga a compact which, although welcome for its promise, remains to be tested for its substantive worth.⁷ Simultaneously, the federal opposition promises to rip up this treaty when it regains office. As John Howard (leader of the Liberal party, which held power in the late 1970s) explained in a recent *Bulletin* interview, entitled "Why I am right":



For a country to make a treaty with itself is absurd...To talk about treaties only breed hostility...I acknowledge that in the past wrongs were done to Aborigines. But they weren't done by me. They weren't done by my parents. They weren't done by my generation...

Black "deprivation," according to Mr. Howard, cannot be assuaged by land rights, which are "fundamentally wrong," but can "only be cured in a pragmatic way over a period of time." He does not say how long.⁸

And while John Howard denies contemporary white responsibility for racial "wrongs," the Muirhead Commission into Black Deaths in Custody realizes the size and enormity of its task. Why, for instance are 35.6 percent of those in jail and 91.7 percent of those processed through police lockups in Western Australia Aboriginal people, when they only comprise 2.7 percent of its population?⁹ Why are Aborigines the most heavily imprisoned people in the world? And, of course, as the Commission sits, the black custody deaths and the instances of endemic police brutality continue to occur, as the recent Geraldton and Redfern riots have underlined. Outside the jails, Aborigines are still dying more than 20 years earlier than whites do; and their babies have five times more chance of dying in infancy than white offspring. Aborigines are six times more likely to be unemployed than whites; and, when working, are clustered in the lowest paying, most arduous and dirty jobs. Their average wage is less than half the white average wage and some 90 percent of them are living below the poverty line. The foul statistics keep rolling off the tongue until, ultimately, they stick in the throat. Yet that is what dispossession in 1989 is all about.¹⁰

And even as black activists form sympathetic alliances with progressive whites; and even though white academics may congratulate themselves for their hard-researched contributions towards public "enlightenment" in publications such as Henry Reynolds's *The Law of the Land*, Peter Read's *A Hundred Years War* or Burgmann and Lee's *A People's History of Australia*, the daunting reality is that attitudinal racism towards Aborigines and Asians is presently more vigorously expressed than it was, say, 20 years ago. 1988 registers historically—much as 1888 has—as a year of rampant racism, as anti-racist whites lose out in the

battle for public attention to certain bigoted politicians, pressure groups and media spokespersons. There is something about Australian centennials, it seems, which in promoting buoyant nationalism, also unleashes a fevered racism in its train.¹¹

On the black side of the picture, a number of the signs seem brighter and less ambiguous. On "Invasion Day" 1988, black demonstrators and their supporters staged the largest and most successful land rights demonstration this country has witnessed: i.e., a minority population of 250,000 managed to put more than 50,000 people, mobilized from across the continent and Tasmania, onto the streets, all "cryin' out for land rights." This was proportionately a more amazing congregation of humanity than the million or so revellers who crowded Sydney Heads that day. The same degree of zeal, networking ability and organizational skills which accomplished this was replicated in May last year at the Brisbane anti-Expo protests and at the Barunga festival in June. Black morale and mobilization power seems very high now, and firmly sustained.

Similarly, a Black Cultural Renaissance is burgeoning which, in its breadth and creative depth, is more than comparable with the Gaelic cultural revival in Ireland early this century, or the Harlem literary Renaissance of the 1920s. In every branch of traditional culture as well as in every adapted facet of European culture, Aboriginal creativity is peaking. It seems impossible to name another time in the last 200 years when black articulation has been so publicly inspired and pronounced. Dr. "Nugget" Coombs recently stated in *Land Rights News* that the last 20 years have seen the emergence in white society of a black "intelligentsia" of "writers, playwrights, actors, artists, dancers and rock bands...administrators and politicians." "And what's important," Coombs adds, "is that all of them identify with and use their skills for the Aboriginal cause. That means that the structure of self-determination and self-management is already there."¹²

Yet another hopeful sign can be discerned in the expanding contacts black Australians are making with dispossessed indigenous groups in other affluent countries—the so-called "Indigenous Nations of the Fourth World": the Maoris; the Inuit of Canada, Alaska and Greenland; the Indian nations of the Americas; the Sami people of Scandina-

via; the Ainu of Japan as well as the Polynesians, Melanesians and Micronesians of the Pacific colonies. All of these people share strikingly similar social problems arising from land deprivation and all are struggling against the consequences of historical and contemporary colonialism.¹³ Aborigines share, and at times surpass the new militancy of the World Council of Indigenous People, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, the Asia/Pacific Region Conference and the Indigenous Rights Group to the International Labour Organization in Geneva. As Gary Foley stated last July:

Individually we're all tiny, insignificant groups of people in the world today. Collectively we can develop a very powerful interest group in the region to back each other up in disputes like the Kanaks have got with the French, the Maoris...with the New Zealand Government and like we have with the Australian Government.¹⁴

White misconception, fear and intransigence, however, still stand in the way of a successful accession to a national system of land rights. It is as if white Australia has been as benumbed and hamstrung by its farcical doctrine of "Terra Nullius" as white South Africans have been by the biblical fundamentalism which nourishes Apartheid. We must break from its mouldering grasp if a proper justice is to be achieved here—a natural, compensatory justice in place of the rough justice of the past. Then, with the return of land, a day may arrive when Aboriginal Australians, along with the Canadian Indian, can say, "The pain has passed." In the meantime, to paraphrase what Dorothy Hewitt wrote of those Pilbara strikers of the late forties: "...and they keep on fighting, and they keep on coming." The black land rights struggle, begun in 1788, continues 200 years later. And the spirits of the 800 million who have lived and died here since the land was first sung and black occupation began, continue to watch and wait.¹⁵

Notes

1. Julian Berger, "Echoes of history" *New Internationalist* 186, (1988), p.21.
2. Roger Milliss *et al*, "Why Write White History?" *Australian Book Review* 41 (1988), p.21.
3. Raymond Evans and Jan Walker, "These Strangers, Where are They Going?": Abo-

original-European land and Wide Fraser Island, *Essential Papers* pp.74-91.

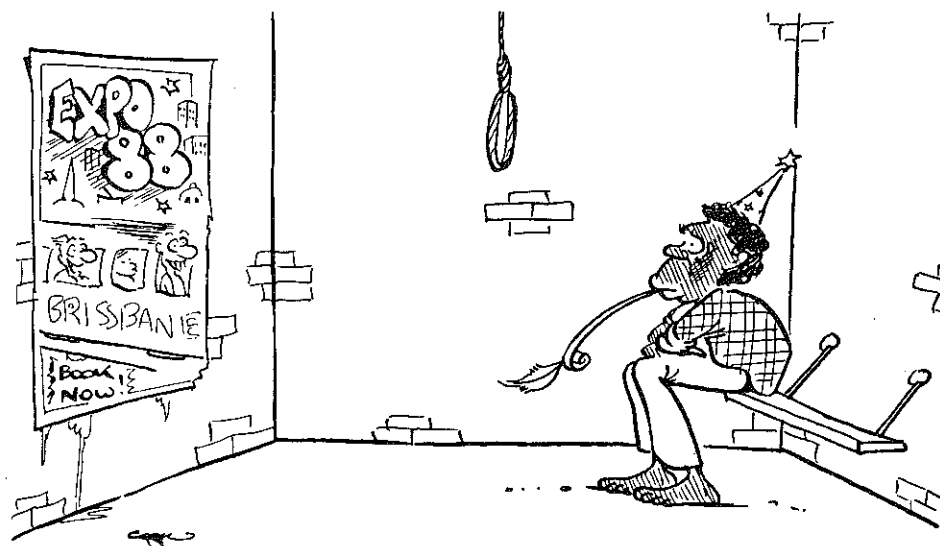
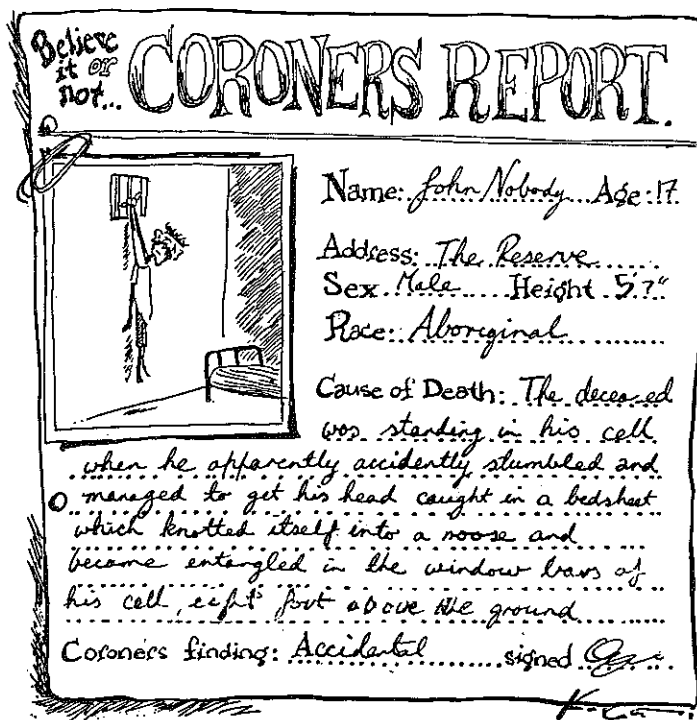
4. "Aboriginal Me" 2, 9 (1988), p.3.
5. Heather Gooda "Rights", in *Staircase History of Australia* Burgmann and McPhee Gribble
6. Gary Foley, "Terra Nullius" *Ibid.*, p.203.
7. "Barunga: The News" 2, 9, (1988)
8. John Howard (net), "Why I am" 1988, p.159
9. Jan Mayman, "Face", *Australian* 33.
10. Julian Berger, *Race and the State of the World* (London: Zed Press) Wayne Ellwood *Native Peoples and Nationalism*, 18 (London, Aboriginal Affairs) (London: Anti-Dispossession)
11. Henry Reynolds *White Man's Country*: Penguin *Hundred Years and the State*. (Oxford: *A People's History of Australia* by Verity Burgmann) wood: McPhee
12. Herbert Cole *Why? Reason for Hope* (1988), p.21.
13. Julian Berger, pp.177-220.
14. "Bonds of Friendship" and "Delegates Stand" *Rights News*, 1.
15. Marie Wilson, *Internationalist* Brown, *The Black Australian Book Society*

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iginal-European Relations in the Fraser Island and Wide Bay Region 1770-1905", in *Fraser Island*, edited by Peter Lauer, *Occasional Papers in Anthropology*, 8 (1977), pp.74-91.

4. "Aboriginal Memorial", *Land Rights News*, 2, 9 (1988), p.32.
5. Heather Goodall, "Cryin' Out for Land Rights", in *Staining the Wattle: A People's History of Australia*, 4, edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), pp.193-5.
6. Gay Foley, "Teaching Whites a Lesson", in *Ibid.*, p.203.
7. "Barunga: The First Steps", *Land Rights News*, 2, 9, (1988), pp.23-26.
8. John Howard (interviewed by David Barnett), "Why I am right", *Bulletin*, 6 September 1988, p.159.
9. Jan Mayman, "The issues W.A. still won't face", *Australian Society*, April 1988, pp.32-33.
10. Julian Berger, *Report from the Frontier: The State of the World's Indigenous People* (London: Zed Books, 1987), pp.183-4; Wayne Ellwood, "Back From the Brink: Native Peoples and the Future", *New Internationalist*, 186 (1988), pp.5-6; Julian Berger, *Aborigines Today: Land and Justice* (London: Anti-Slavery Society, 1988), p.43.
11. Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1987); Peter Read, *A Hundred Years Way. The Wiradjuri People and the State.* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1988); *A People's History of Australia*, 1-4, edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988).
12. Herbert Cole Coombs, "Nugget Finds Good Reason for Hope", *Land Rights News*, 2, 9, (1988), p.21.
13. Julian Berger, *Report from the Frontier*, pp.177-220.
14. "Bonds of Friendship and Solidarity Are Growing" and Terry O'Shane, "Aboriginal Delegates Stand Firm at the ILO", *Land Rights News*, 11 and 17.
15. Marie Wilson, "The Circle of Reason", *New Internationalist*, 186 (1988), p.19; Max Brown, *The Black Eureka* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1976).

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For black Australians there was nothing to celebrate.

Cartoons from *Beyond a Joke: An Anti-Bicentenary Cartoon Book*, compiled by Kaz Cooke (Victoria, Australia: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988).

