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*WEH Stanner and the historians*

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I begin with a famous quotation, one that you may well have heard or read already, possibly many times. It is, in fact, quoted with ever increasing frequency and ever greater claims for its significance. It comes from Stanner's Boyer Lectures, *After the Dreaming*. After listing a range of general books about Australian history written between 1939 and 1955 and noting their slight or non-existent treatment of Aboriginal history, Stanner said in the second lecture:

I need not extend the list. A partial survey is enough to let me make the point that inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so (Stanner 1974, pp. 24–5).

This was followed by a call for a new and different kind of history. 'I am no historian', Stanner went on:

...but the history I would like to see written would bring into the main flow of its narrative the life and times of men like David Unaipon, Albert Namatjira, Robert Tudawali, Durmugam, Douglas Nicholls, Dexter Daniels, and many others. Not to scrape up significance for them but because they typify so vividly the other side of a story over which the great Australian silence reigns; the story of the things we were unconsciously resolved not to discuss with them or treat with

them about; the story, in short, of the unacknowledged relations between two racial groups within a single field of life supposedly unified by the principle of assimilation (ibid., p. 25).

These were probably the most famous Boyer Lectures ever given from their inception in 1959 to the present. The published lectures sold extremely well; my copy is dated 1974 and is the seventh edition; from 1979 they were also available in Stanner's collection of essays *White man got no Dreaming: essays 1938–1973*. In a radio anthology of Boyer Lectures selected by ABC chairman Donald McDonald in 2003, they were included along with lectures by Manning Clark in 1976, Shirley Hazzard in 1984, Noel Pearson in 1993, Inga Clendinnen in 1999 and Geoffrey Blainey in 2001 (McDonald 2003). One of Australia's leading Indigenous spokesmen, Noel Pearson, who trained in both history and law in the 1980s, said in *his* Boyer Lecture in 1993 that the lectures:

...hold their own amongst this country's finest writings on matters black and white. Today, more than ever, the series which Professor Stanner delivered for the ABC in 1968 makes compelling reading. His lectures articulate, illuminate and provide some guidance with questions that will consume the people of this continent for as long as we need to consider them (Pearson 2001, p. 89).

Many historians have noted the impact of Stanner's words on their own work, and on the writing of Australian history generally. Henry Reynolds tells us that he read the lectures some time late in 1969. The lecture on 'The great Australian silence', he writes, 'helped strengthen my disquiet about mainstream historical writing' (Reynolds 1999, p. 91). He was especially struck by the remark that the inattention was not simply absent-mindedness but a structural matter (ibid., pp. 91–2). In 1984, Reynolds declared that the work on Aboriginal history had been so extensive since Stanner's lecture 16 years earlier that one could now say that 'the Great Australian Silence has been shattered, the cult of forgetfulness abandoned. Slowly, unevenly, often with difficulty, white Australians are incorporating the black experience into their image of the national past' (Reynolds 1984, p. 19). Bain Attwood has noted many times that Aboriginal people had been excluded from Australian history when Stanner spoke and were increasingly included thereafter (Attwood 2005, p. 17; Attwood & Foster 2003, pp. 1, 3; Attwood 1996, pp. xiv–xv; Attwood & Arnold 1992, p. x). Robert Manne begins his introduction to his 2003 edited collection *Whitewash* with these words: 'In 1968, the anthropologist WEH Stanner delivered what turned out to be perhaps the most consequential lecture ever broadcast on the ABC' (Manne, 2003, p.1). He, too, argued that the hundreds of books and

articles on Aboriginal history published since the late 1960s had collectively shattered the silence of which Stanner spoke.

Clearly Stanner's lectures *have* been important. But as time has gone on, the narrative of how Australian history came to be transformed from a largely white settler narrative to one at least attempting to deal with the history of interaction between Aboriginal and settler peoples since 1788, and indeed earlier, has become a little too simple. Stanner's brilliant and now iconic phrase the 'great Australian silence' and the analysis that went with it have come to stand in for a much more complex process of social and cultural change. I want to complicate this narrative, not least because it is a white narrative, a return to the 'great man' theory of history. I want to suggest that the change that occurred was at least as much driven by Aboriginal people, voices, and politics, and that Stanner was an important register and publicist of these voices and these changes rather than their sole originator. I also want to suggest that this simplified narrative belongs more to the subsequent memory of Stanner's Boyer Lectures than to the lectures themselves. It is to this more complex history I now turn.

#### THE ARGUMENT

Let's start by going back to the lectures. There are five, the first two of which are the most relevant to my discussion. The opening lecture, 'Looking back', begins with an evocation of the first five years of British settlement, with the aim of showing how formative for subsequent Australian history these initial few years were. It traces the sequence of events from Governor Phillip's offer of friendship and desire to form good relations with the Aboriginal people of the Sydney region, through a period of avoidance marred by some violent incidents, Phillip's subsequent authorising a firing party to keep Aborigines away and his kidnapping of Arabanoo, Colby and Bennelong, and finally to a climactic period at the end of 1790. 'Three themes', he writes of this period, 'are now starting to weave themselves together in a way that will have a signal bearing on Australian history' (Stanner 1974, pp. 9–17 and hereafter). These are: a break in the 'fabric of native life' leading Aborigines to cease attacks and instead to come into the settlement for survival; the achievement of settler self-sufficiency; and the formation of a punitive expedition to revenge the killing of a convict named McEntire, 'a villainous man'. When the expedition fails and Aborigines continue to flock into the settlement, the 'streets of Sydney are filling with the dispossessed, the homeless, the powerless and the poverty-stricken'. And so already in the first few years we see 'a basic structure of relations which ever since has formed a part of the continuing anatomy of Australian life'. In the last part of the lecture Stanner shows how this structure was still operating in the 1930s, when there were some changes in attitudes and relations away from negative and unsuccessful

policies of protection and segregation towards more positive policies ‘for their social, economic and political advancement’. Yet a general change in public attitudes did not follow, he argues, because there was still in place ‘a real structure of life — a racial structure — akin to that of Phillip’s day’. Even those who made the conceptual breaks found it ‘a very difficult struggle to escape from a style of thinking that unconsciously ratified that order of life as natural and unalterable’.

The second lecture, ‘The great Australian silence’, continues the discussion of why the change in attitude amongst non-Aboriginal Australians in the 1930s was confined to those, such as administrators and anthropologists, who were closely associated with them. To prove his case that even the ‘socially conscious’ had little interest in Aboriginal people at this time he looks at what such people were likely to have been reading in the 1930s and beyond (Stanner 1974, p. 22). He considers a ‘mixed lot of histories and commentaries dealing with Australian affairs in a more general way’ published between 1939, when government policies of assimilation began to take shape, and 1955, when assimilation policies first came under critique (*ibid.*). His point is that these histories and commentaries both reflected and helped form the socially aware, and they showed little interest in or understanding of Aboriginal people; while some of these texts discussed Aboriginal history, it was always marginal to and somewhat outside the main story.<sup>1</sup> He then makes the argument that I quoted at the beginning of this paper, that this inattention or marginalisation was a ‘structural matter’ and calls for a different kind of history, one that will bring the story of Aboriginal people ‘into the main flow of its narrative’, and deal with ‘the unacknowledged relations between two racial groups within a single field of life’. The lecture ends with a reference to the recent explosion of interest, predicting that ‘I hardly think that what I have called “the great Australian silence” will survive the research that is now in course’ (Stanner 1974, p. 27). Here he referred to the work of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in promoting studies which ‘will bring the historical and the contemporary dimensions together and will assuredly persuade scholars to renovate their categories of understanding’ (*ibid.*).<sup>2</sup>

The lectures are thus both a criticism of historians and other intellectuals of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (and early 1960s) and also a foreshadowing that the great Australian silence is in the process of being broken. It is the criticism, however, rather than the suggestion of impending change, that is most remembered.

### **WHO WERE STANNER’S TARGETS?**

Who were Stanner’s targets in these two lectures? It is quite clear they were mainly the historians of his day. Those he mentions (and he makes no claim

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to comprehensiveness, just illustration of a general trend), include M Barnard Eldershaw's *My Australia* (1939), which, he says, treats Aboriginal people as marginal to the story. He also names Brian Fitzpatrick's *The Australian People* (1946), which he says almost ignores Aboriginal people altogether; RM Crawford's 1952 work of history, *Australia*, which has some interesting material but little on the recent past; and most notably and notoriously Gordon Greenwood's edited collection and textbook, *Australia: a social and political history* (1955). The Greenwood example is especially telling; a professor of history at the University of Queensland, his edited collection was a staple for history students for many years, and was still in use in the late 1960s (Foster 2003). It has no index reference for Aborigines, and Stanner finds only six mentions in the text. Remarkably, Frank Crowley's first chapter, 'The foundation years, 1788–1821' has only two.<sup>3</sup> Stanner more or less ends his list of historians there, though he also notes that this lack of interest ran on into the 1960s, citing Peter Coleman's edited collection, *Australian civilization* (1962), with its 'total silence on all matters aboriginal' (Stanner 1974, p. 24).

He treads very carefully and selectively, though. Perhaps as a professor of anthropology in the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University he did not want to antagonise his fellow researchers at his own university. At the time, his fellow history professors at ANU were Manning Clark in the Faculty of Arts and John La Nauze in the history department of the Research School of Social Sciences. Both would have made good targets. Manning Clark's otherwise excellent *Select documents in Australian history, 1851–1900* (1955), which was so important in the development of the university teaching of Australian history, contains very few references to Aborigines, and only one comment from Clark himself, who writes of 'the absence of a serious threat from the aborigines' (Clark 1955, p. 320). The first his six-volume *History of Australia* (1962) begins with the sentence, 'Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century' (Clark 1962, p. 1). Aboriginal people are represented as barbarians unable to adapt to and survive colonisation. As Clark wrote much later, 'My eye was on the coming of the white man. My eye was on the men and women of the First Fleet, and the civilization they brought with them in their baggage. My story began with the coming of civilization to a country where previously there was barbarism... In my mind's eye the First Fleet was a Noah's Ark of civilization' Clark 1992, p. 38–9). In his own Boyer Lectures, in 1976, Clark wrote, without referring to Stanner, that 'my eyes had to be opened so that I might see the coming of the white man possibly as a curse for the land' (Clark 1976, p. 21).

Stanner comes closer to criticising ANU's other history professor, John (Jack) La Nauze, quoting him directly, but not by name. In the first lecture

he quotes three unnamed historians on what happened after the early years of contact: one said ‘the native question sank into unimportance’; another that they became ‘a codicil to the Australian story’; and yet another that they became ‘a melancholy footnote to Australian history’ (Stanner 1974, p. 11). I have not yet tracked down who made the first remark; the second came from Marjorie Barnard, of whom more later. The third, the ‘melancholy footnote’, comes from La Nauze’s presidential address to the history section of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1959. Entitled ‘The study of Australian history 1929–1959’, this lecture argued in part that Australia was unusual in having ‘no real experience of formidable opposition by the native inhabitants. Unlike the Maori, the American Indian or the south African Bantu, the Australian aboriginal is noticed in our history only in a melancholy anthropological footnote’ (La Nauze 1959, p. 11). Stanner left out the word ‘anthropological’ but in fact it is quite revealing; La Nauze meant that Aboriginal people had drifted out of history altogether; they could be only of anthropological, not historical interest.

#### **STANNER AS HISTORIAN**

Stanner was, of course, not the first to notice that Australians generally had great difficulty in coming to terms with their colonial past. In a speech four years after the Boyer Lectures, to the Australasian College of Surgeons in October 1972, Stanner drew attention to the work of HM Moran, an Australian surgeon, who wrote in 1939:

We are still afraid of our own past. The Aborigines we do not like to talk about. We took their land, but then we gave them in exchange the Bible and tuberculosis, with for special bonus alcohol and syphilis. Was it not a fair deal? Anyhow, nobody ever heard them complain about it (Stanner 1979c, p. 321).

Stanner commented that ‘in those fifty words, as I now discover, he summed up in advance the substantial thesis of my Boyer Lectures of 1968: our unwillingness to contemplate some of the truths of the past’ (ibid.).

Indeed Stanner himself had made some of the same argument 30 years before the Boyer Lectures, and a year before Moran. In an essay entitled ‘The Aborigines’, which focused on the continuing disappearance of Aboriginal people and tribes and the urgency of doing something to stop the process, he commented that there were ‘a few vestigial regrets appearing here and there in a mass of solid indifference’ (Stanner 1939, p. 2). Their life and death had made little impact, he suggested, on ‘the thought, the culture, even the literature’ of Australia: ‘The native tragedy does not yet serve as the motif of dramatic, literary or artistic work of any consequence. There are no epics on the last of the tribes. There are no national monuments to a vanishing people’. Their disappearance is regarded, erroneously, as ‘something which