WRITING A
HISTORY OF
AUSTRALIA

By
C M H Clark
Occasional Papers No. 8
The Second Eric Johnston Lecture, delivered at the State Reference Library of the Northern Territory, Darwin, on 1 July 1987.

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4. Point Charles Lighthouse; and The Military Occupation of Cox Peninsula, by Mike Foley. (1987)


FOREWORD

For some time we at the State Reference Library have felt that there existed a serious gap in Darwin’s cultural calendar. The city had no lecture series dealing in depth with the history of the Territory in all its diverse ramifications. Australia’s southern cities all have their individual lectures, such as the Boyer and the Curtin lectures and, closer to home, Alice Springs has the Doreen Braitling Memorial Lectures. All Darwin had to offer in this area were the ‘Warehouse Workshops’ run by the then Darwin Institute of Technology.

When no other organisation showed signs of coming up with anything suitable, the State Reference Library instituted the Eric Johnston Lectures. I am grateful to His Honour Commodore Johnston for agreeing to have the lecture series named after him, and for delivering the inaugural lecture himself. Who better to name the series after than our present Administrator, who experienced with other Darwinites the terrors and traumas of Cyclone Tracy.

The Eric Johnston Lectures will be delivered annually, probably during the Dry Season, alternating between a prominent Territorian and a reputable interstate/overseas personality.

The topics of the lectures can cover any subject, provided the central theme relates to the Northern Territory. The lectures will be published by the NT Library Service in its Occasional Papers series, and we are optimistic that the ABC will continue the practice of recording and subsequently broadcasting the lectures.

It is my hope that, through these lectures, the people of Darwin will be able to hear famous people speak on subjects close to the hearts of Territorians, and perhaps discuss points of interest with the speaker afterwards.

The Eric Johnston Lectures will, I am sure, establish themselves as a prestigious and scholarly annual event in Darwin’s social and cultural calendar, and make a real contribution to the spread of knowledge on Territory history, not just in the Northern Territory, but throughout Australia.

NAIDA TATTERSALL
Director
Library Services Branch
INTRODUCTION
by
COMMODORE ERIC JOHNSTON
ADMINISTRATOR OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

When I was approached by the State Reference Library seeking my agreement to my name being linked with a series of lectures, I felt honoured, rather humble and totally delighted. My delight was somewhat diminished when I learnt that I had to deliver the first of the Eric Johnston lectures and, at the time of that lecture one year ago I noted that I was concerned that the calibre of subsequent speakers might be such as to make my inaugural attempt a thing to be pitied. My forecast has indeed proved correct on the very first repetition of the lecture in so far as the second lecture is being delivered by a man whom I truly believe can be called part of Australia's living heritage. Professor Charles Manning Hope Clark is a household name to all literate Australians. As he stands before us this evening he can look back on an incredible academic and literary career which I suggest to you cannot be equalled by any of his contemporaries. I will not attempt to take up the remainder of the night by enumerating the awards and honours which have been showered upon him for his contributions to Australia in general over the last half century. Suffice it to say that without Manning Clark's contributions, the history of Australia would be a much lesser known and poorer subject than it is today as we approach our bicentenary.

Ladies and gentlemen, I had the pleasure of hearing Manning Clark speak at a workshop in Alice Springs at the recent Australian Folk Festival. On that occasion I heard his wisdom and his humour and I saw with my own eyes how a very varied audience warmed to his humour and his remarks. I have no doubts whatsoever that ahead of us this evening is a time of similar delight and I have pleasure and pride in introducing to you Professor Manning Clark.
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by
C M H CLARK

The Administrator, ladies and gentlemen, I am always nervous before speaking and I am feeling very nervous tonight, I do not quite know why. If I may start with a personal reminiscence.

In November or December 1934, when I was a young man, I first played cricket for the Melbourne University cricket team. The first game in which I was selected to play for Melbourne University, we were to play Richmond, and the fast bowler for Richmond was Ernie McCormick. He was one of the faster bowlers ever in the game. The University batted first, the opening batsman for the University of Melbourne attempted to hook McCormick for four, and he made the mistake similar to that made by Bradman in 1932. The ball hit the lower side of the bat, and instead of hitting his wicket it came down onto a part of his anatomy which modesty prevents me to name here, and with such force that the protector he was wearing was turned inside out. Well, he was carried off the Richmond Cricket Ground just as a person whom you a moment ago called Charles Manning Hope Clark had to go out and replace him at the crease. I was supposed to be a promising batsman.

Well, the Richmond Cricket Ground is not the size of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, but it seemed a long way from the pavilion to the wicket. On the way out, I tried everything to stop feeling frightened. I was terrified. I told myself 'Be still my soul, it will only be for an instant'. That did not help at all. I tried to remember the words of the school song. I had been a scholarship boy at Melbourne Grammar School and the part referring to cricket ended something like this 'Iron nerve and pluck unyielding, scarce can lose the day'. I could find neither pluck nor nerve, but as I got towards the wicket, this chap McCormick, that marvellous bowler, throwing the ball from one hand to the other, looked me hard in the eyes and seemed to convey a message, 'This is a game, we have got to give it our best'. I thought, 'Well, there is no point in pretending that I am not afraid. When the first ball comes I'll take a wild swipe at it. Whatever happens I will run down the wicket, fall over and get out'. That seemed to me to be the obvious solution to the problem of facing Ernie McCormick.

Well, he bowled the first ball and I took a wild swipe and I missed it, so I could not run down the wicket. In those days things were very different from now, the captain of the University team was always ten years older than the other players. He would call us by our surnames, we called him Sir. Time marches on doesn’t it? He walked down the wicket and said to me ‘Clark, if you want to play in the Melbourne University cricket team you will behave yourself’. Well, I did try to behave myself and strangely enough McCormick did not get me out, God knows why. But as soon as they took him off I was so relieved they put on a medium pace bowler who seemed like a piece of cake, that I tried to hit him for six, and was clean bowled first ball. Anyhow that is the point, to tell you that we all have fatal flaws.

This lecture is in honour of the Administrator of the Northern Territory, and I think I have some idea why the people of the Northern Territory want to honour the Administrator. I saw him last at Alice Springs in April this year. It was about dusk and there were a large number of people there, and I hope you will not mind me mentioning this, but I noticed that unlike the author of the Book of Job, it seemed to me that the Administrator had not made a pact with his eyes that he would not look on women who were comely. I might be gravely mistaken. As darkness came down there, I realised that here was a man who was greatly loved, a man who liked listening to and telling a good yarn, a man who had the virtues of old Australia. It seemed to me then that this was a way of starting tonight, by saying to you, Mr Administrator, that you really should have been a historian, because that is mainly what I think historians do, they try to tell a story.
In their case it is about the past, and like you they try to entertain, and like you in telling the story they try to increase our wisdom and our understanding of the human situation. Like all good storytellers they try to make our living and our dying a little easier.

All good stories do three things, they tell us something about life, they create human beings, and they create scenes. Take for example the story of Noah and the Ark. It is a marvellous story, partly because it is brief. It takes about a page and a half to tell it. It is a great story because it has a point of view. It is a point of view, I take it, that twentieth century people possibly would not accept — it starts off by saying that the hearts of men are filled with evil. It also creates a character straight away — in this case the character of Noah. It is done very quickly, does not take thousands and thousands of words, it is half a sentence ‘... and Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord’. He would obviously have been a good Captain of Boats at Melbourne Grammar. He is the sort of man who is obviously meant to get on, and I will repeat it ‘... and Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord’. It is marvellous isn’t it, he is the chap who did the right sort of thing at the right time. The historian creates scenes. After the ordeal in the Ark, when the rain finally stopped, like all human beings, Noah felt that he was entitled to some relaxation. The relaxation that Noah took is something I think that you would understand in the Top End of Australia. We are told graphically and marvellously that Noah drank of the fruit of the vine and he lay in his tent and he was very drunken. I should add that like most drunks he took all his clothes off.

Now it is that scene of relaxation after the ordeal that has caught the imagination of all great storytellers and all great painters, because the sons of Noah looked at him, looked at their father, and it is interesting the way in which different painters have seen this. Some have seen the scene of the sons looking at Noah with pity, with understanding, and with compassion, but some have seen them mocking their father as he lay there drunk in his tent. So you have these three things in a story, a great story. You have a point of view about the human situation, the power to create human character, and you tell the story by creating scenes.

Now if you are as old as I am, you will know that the story comes from the Book of Genesis. There are large numbers of people now, going round Australia, who would say ‘What is Genesis?’. Time marches on doesn’t it? But I mentioned this because one of the difficulties about telling the story of human life in Australia is just this problem of genesis. When did it begin, what is the genesis of human life here in Australia? There is no agreement about that. I am going on now to say some things that I hope will not upset you, but will lead into this question, so that you will see in a moment what I am trying to get at.

The Aborigine has one view of the creation of human beings in Australia or why there are human beings in Australia. In the eyes of the Australian Aborigine they were always here, they came up out of the ground, or down from the sky, according to the stories of creation, which of course, vary as they vary with all groups of people. But they insist that the creation of the Aborigine was here in Australia. He was not an immigrant. They also insist because they were created here they have a mystical union between themselves and the land. They and the land are one.

Now the white man has quite a different view on the genesis of human life in Australia. As the white man sees it, in the beginning there was the land, the land of Australia. At a time when Tasmania was joined to what we now call the mainland of Australia, Kangaroo Island was part of the mainland of Australia, Australia was joined to New Guinea, New Guinea was joined to Indonesia and Indonesia was joined to the mainland of Asia. So there is no problem about how people could get here, they could walk here, they did not have to make a sea journey. White men insisted, and still insist, that in the beginning there was no human life, that the Aborigines were the first immigrants here, and hence they argue that all those who live in Australia are immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants. I will come back to that, that the one thing human beings have in common in Australia is that they are all either immigrants or the
descendants of immigrants. The only thing that we have in common is the land of Australia. Australia is our mother, our common mother.

Now there is another difference. Immediately you try to tell a story of Australia, the Aborigines, as you know here in the Top End, resent bitterly the picture created of them by the early European visitors to this country. Take the picture of the Aborigines first portrayed by those magnificent Dutch seamen who came here from 1606 on. They were looking for a land or a country which would be the source, as they put it so marvellously, of 'uncommonly large profit'. They should be alive today, shouldn't they! There are lots of companies in Australia that could accommodate them very nicely. But in their search for a country close to the archipelago of Indonesia, where there would be uncommonly large profit, when they got into the Gulf of Carpentaria the first of them, Willem Jansz, was bitterly disappointed. Not far from the present site of Weipa on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, Willem Jansz said about what he saw, 'finding no good to be done there'. He wanted to make huge profits. He was not to know of course that in the twentieth century CRA would draw millions and millions of dollars every year from the land where they were standing.

They were also in search of souls to convert to Christianity. Over and above trade they wanted to find human beings whom they could convert to the Christian religion. But to their enormous surprise, when they offered the inhabitants of what we now call Cape York Peninsula the benefits of European civilisation, they were killed as they put it 'by heathens who are man-eaters'. Of course that is a remark that lives on and becomes a great source of bitterness. Similar words of condemnation both of the appearance of our country and of its inhabitants, its original inhabitants the Aborigines, were made by another Dutchman Jan Carstensz in 1623. He said of it (the Gulf of Carpentaria), 'It is a vast region inhabited by savage, cruel and black barbarians who slew some of our sailors'. As I said, they were just as unfavourably impressed by the land itself. The appearance of the country was so off-putting that Carstensz came to the conclusion that it was not suitable for the purpose of civilised human beings. So they left and went back to Java.

If I may go back just a few years to 1616. Think for one moment of the shock that must have been experienced by that Dutch sea captain Dirk Hartog when in 1616 he came ashore on Dirk Hartog Island near Shark Bay, west coast of Western Australia. A few months earlier he had left the beautiful, orderly, well-tilled soil of the Netherlands. From there he had gone around the Cape of Good Hope and had restocked at Port Louis at Mauritius. There, he and his sailors had seen the luscious splendours of Mauritius. The next sight they saw was this barren inhospitable west coast of Western Australia. They recoiled in horror and they recoiled in horror at the people they saw too.

Well now, not long after that, in 1688, William Dampier landed on the west coast near Derby. 1988 is also his tri-centenary. When I was a boy we were told he was a great brave Englishman, when I got to the age of 21 I was told he was a pirate, so I will just leave you to work out for yourselves what he was like. He came ashore at Cygnet Bay, near Derby in Western Australia. I realise it is not the Northern Territory but it is the Top End of Australia, and it was Dampier who noted in his journal the words which were going to cause such terrible trouble later on. Dampier noted, after describing the Australian Aborigines he saw near Derby, 'The inhabitants of the country are the miserablest people in the world. Setting aside their human shape they differ but little from the brutes'. Dampier was suggesting that the Australian Aborigine was closer to the animal creation than to the human creation. Remember, unlike us, he is writing in the general framework of the great chain of being from God, the angels, monsters like ourselves, human beings, then the animals, the plant creation and so on down. Dampier is saying, these chaps are not like the angles, they are not like God, they are not like human beings, they belong more to the brute creation.

So, in the Top End of Australia this disastrous, distorted and tragic-laden picture of the first
inhabitants of Australia was printed in the minds of the white man. Now you know better than I do, or as well as I do, that in the nineteenth century after the British came here in January 1788, this view was added to. It was compounded and strengthened by the experience the white men had in their relations with the Aborigines. It was in a sense a great tragedy. The white man had come here offering the gift of his civilisation. Do not lose your nerve — it was a great civilisation they brought out with the First Fleet. They did not just bring out the lash, the gun, gun powder, the plough, the horse, the cow, the sheep, and two rabbits — by the way they were so hungry that the rabbits did not increase and multiply. As you probably know, that time the rabbit did not survive. It is one of the rare cases where the rabbit has not survived. Remember also the First Fleet brought out the music of Mozart. It is worth remembering isn't it? They brought out a great civilisation with them. They came here believing they had a great civilisation to offer to the original tenants of the deserts of Australia.

But to the great astonishment of the white man, the Aborigine rejected the gift. There were tragic scenes and I do not want to elaborate for you, you know them as well as I do. I will take one which I think heightens or brings out very clearly the problem of the white man presenting this great civilisation and it being rejected. Hermannsburg, close to Alice Springs, was begun by the Lutheran missionaries. They were astounded, they just could not understand why their civilisation was not wanted. Why was this? They tried everything. The Aborigine was not interested, was not impressed. There was one great moment when Pastor Vogelsang (marvellous name isn't it, birdsinger), decided 'We have one thing that they simply will not be able to resist. We will sing them the Cantatas of Bach'. They did that there. But once again they were not impressed, they did not want this great gift. So poor Pastor Vogelsang, (by the way he is buried in the cemetery at Hermannsburg), went down on his knees and asked God to perform two marvels. Remember the Church of England prayer book, 'Oh Thou who alone worketh great marvels'. Well Vogelsang asked for two marvels. He asked God to make the sun less hot — we are all pretty mad aren't we really — and secondly he asked God to change the heart of the Australian Aborigine. But God said not a word.

The white man by then was deeply convinced that the Aborigines were little children who had to be looked after, that for some inscrutable reason, which the white man did not understand, when the Aborigines came into contact with what the white man believed to be a higher civilisation, the Aborigines decayed, they went to pieces. It was possibly an extraordinary irony, that the difference in the standard of living, material standard of living I am talking about, between the white man and the Aborigine was enormously increased in the nineteenth century. It is an extraordinary irony that when Arthur Phillip gets off those boats in Port Jackson the English are experimenting with the steam-engine, the Industrial Revolution is getting under way in England. The Industrial Revolution which is going to increase enormously the material gap, the material gap, between the two groups of people. In contact with this civilisation they, the Aborigines, decayed, they went to pieces. As Charles Dickens, who is not a brutal man, put it, 'The Aborigines of Australia were doomed' he said, 'to disappear off the face of the world, before the march of a vastly superior power'.

By the 1850s and 60s you had a head-on collision between the white man and the Aborigine. The white man went on saying 'These chaps are ungrateful, they do not want our great civilisation, they are treacherous, they can only be prevented from deeds of abomination against white men and white women by the gun and the whip and the jail — that is all they understand'. But in the eyes of some others it looked, by the middle of the nineteenth century, that these white people who had come to this ancient continent of Australia, looking either for souls for Christ or uncommonly large profit, had committed great evil. They had judged a section of the human race to be little children, permanent little children.

So, in talking about writing a history of Australia, the main point I want to make tonight is that if you wish to tell a story of Australia, you have got to show how that prejudice, not of white man for black man alone, there is black man for white man as well, festered in the white man's
mind and in the Aborigine's mind until well on into the twentieth century.

Now, let me try to illustrate this to you with the story of the massacre at Coniston, sometimes known as Brooks Soak. Winter 1928, at Brooks Soak or Coniston, a dingo trapper, Freddie Brooks asked the local Aborigines to let one of their women wash his clothes. This is the most marvellous argument for seduction I have ever heard. She remained there with Brooks at so called Brooks Soak. We know that two Aborigines then came to Coniston or Brooks Soak, whichever one you would like to call it, and asked to see 'white fella'. Now the accounts of what happened when they arrived differ. We do know that Brooks himself was killed by those two Aborigines. Witnesses differed in their accounts. Some said that the throat of Brooks was cut by a stone knife. Other Aborigines said, 'No, he was murdered with a tomahawk'. A half-caste reported the murder of Brooks to Mounted Constable William George Murray at Alice Springs.

Murray was, and this is very understandable, a hero of the white people in Central Australia and in Northern Australia. Mounted Constable Murray had all the qualities and all the virtues of the Australian bushman. He could tame wild horses, he could repair a motor car and make it run, he was brave in the face of danger, he had the enormous courage to face up to the greatest horror humanity had ever known till that time, the Battle of the Somme, and my God that must have taken great courage. But, like most Aussies in the Australian bush, brave man though he was, he was terrified in the presence of women. We are told that if a woman came into the room he became very shy and very tongue-tied. I do not know how he behaved once he had about ten beers, maybe it would have been different then, but normally like most Aussies of the time he became tongue-tied in the presence of women. We also know that he believed in revenge. He accepted without question, and I am not criticising him or challenging him for this, the law of the Old Testament, the Sabbatical law, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. When he heard that the white fella Brooks had been murdered he organised what the Americans would call a posse of men or a party and went to punish the Aborigines at Brooks Soak.

Now what happened when he arrived at Brooks Soak is described in different ways by different witnesses and this is of course part of the whole problem — who do you believe? I hope people who have different moral views from mine do not mind if I use the word beginning with F now. It is not my word of course, it is the word used by an Aborigine, who has learned it from the white man. One Aborigine is asked what happened when Murray and his party arrived — by the way they killed 28 Aborigines. This chap said, 'They bin shootin' the whole fuckin' lot, all people, they shot 'em like bullock, big mob of 'em, women, kids, man. "Too much black fella", they said, "kill the whole fuckin' lot"'. Certainly whatever happened one thing is not disputed — at least 28 died.

Well immediately the missionaries, all the moral improvers of humanity, all those humanitarians who want us to be different to what we really are, asked the government of the Commonwealth of Australia to charge Mounted Constable Murray with murder. They went on to tell Mr Bruce the Prime Minister, in Canberra by then, Canberra having started in 1927, that if he did not do something this time that he himself would be personally responsible for contributing towards the gloomy progress of the certain, utter and total destruction of the Aborigines in Australia.

Now all the missionaries, these moral improvers and humanitarians, kicked up, if I may use a very common Australian expression, a great stink about what had happened. A large number of white settlers replied, 'No, none of that mealy mouthed nonsense, none of that rubbish, the gun and the whip are the only ways to make black fellows, abos and coons, abandon their barbarous deeds of revenge'. Well the missionaries and the improvers demanded an enquiry — what did happen at Brooks Soak, at Coniston? To his great credit Stanley Melbourne Bruce agreed. But, once you say, 'Yes, there will be an enquiry', who is going to be on the enquiry?
People who have already made up their minds about the character of the Aborigine or people who have already made up their minds about the character of the white man? Secondly, once the evidence is called for, whose story is going to be believed? That enquiry went on for a long time, and in the sequel as you probably know, Constable Murray was exonerated by the white man's enquiry. Now maybe that was the correct decision — I am not a lawyer and I do not know. But of course in the eyes of the Aboriginal people of Australia that was another example of what they had come to believe — there is no such thing as justice for a black man in a white man's court. The Coniston episode strengthened that tendency of the Aborigines to talk about white lies, white brutality, about the use of the whip and the use of the gun. It immediately preceded and played a part in the origin of movements by the Aborigines themselves to take over the administration and government of their own affairs. It played a part also in the conversion of some white people away from the notion that these people are permanent children, into thinking or seeing them as human beings who had a different sort of culture from the white man's culture; as human beings who had a perfect right to decide for themselves which culture they wish to adopt and follow.

Well, so it stood at the end of the 1920s but by then of course you were getting people like David Unaipon and Billy Cooper and so on coming up and talking about a different view, from the point of view of the Aborigines themselves.

I am telling you this story very quickly as part of the problem of writing about the history of Australia, because I happen to believe that it is one of these things that I try to do in telling the history of Australia. Of course, like everything you try to do it is never as good as you want it to be, is it? Do you not find that between the conception and the creation falls a shadow? Life is very long, but no matter how hard you try you could never do justice to that great tragedy of the coming of the white men to Australia and what they did to the ancient continent, what the ancient continent did to them, and what they did to the black man, and what the black man did to them. I am also trying to tell it in my own imperfect way because I believe that we should now make a really genuine and serious attempt to understand what happened. If both the white man and the Aborigine make that attempt then there will be a long overdue increase in wisdom and understanding of each other.

The state of the Aborigine is a stain on the life of humanity in Australia. It has become possibly worse than the worst features of the convict stain in the early period of British settlement here. You may remember those magnificent words of condemnation used by Father Ullathorne, about the British use of semi-convict, semi-slave labour in Australia. I like to think that Ullathorne will live on because he told us a great moral truth about Australia, and I would also like to think he will live on because he had a great insight. When he left Australia he went back to Birmingham and he realised that there was a man of genius who was working with him as a recent convert to the Roman Catholic Church. His name was John Henry Newman. What an achievement that was, to bring out John Henry Newman and encourage him to start talking, and if you have not read Newman on life, do so before you die. Now Ullathorne had seen Norfolk Island, he had seen Port Macquarie, he had seen Emu Plains, he had seen Moreton Bay, he had seen the whole lot, and he said about it, 'We have been doing an ungracious and ungodly thing. We have taken a vast portion of God's earth and have made a cesspool. The removal of such a plague from the earth concerns the whole human race'. Now, I think anyone who tries to write the story of Australia, that is, the story of all people in Australia, or to teach the story of Australia, should write it and teach it to show those who read and those who listen that the descendants of the British are now on trial, that the descendants of the Aborigines are on trial. The time has come to stop the slanging match, to stop accusing each other of abominations in the past and moral infamies, to stop all this talk about white lies, or black bastards. We are all on trial. We have got to take the blinkers off our eyes and face the truth about the past. We must also, if we can stop breast beating, stop all this 'standing up in public and saying how terribly sorry I am for what I have done in the past', stop all those bogus acts of penitence. We must try as hard as we can to increase in wisdom and understanding. The whole
point of writing a history about a country is so that we can liberate ourselves from the dead hand of the past. The whole point of knowing about the past of humanity in Australia is to prevent all of us, the Aborigines, the British, the Europeans, and the Asians, from being doomed to go on repeating the past.

I am glad to be here, I am honoured to speak in the presence of the Administrator because, as I tried to show you at the beginning, I saw in Alice Springs that he stood for the values and virtues of old Australia, for kindness in another's trouble, and courage in your own. I thought I saw there, but you must correct me if I was wrong, that you stood for what Henry Lawson understood by Australia, a place where we all tramp in mateship side by side. But the trouble with the ideal of mateship, there is nothing wrong with this idea of being mates, but the trouble with the Aussie idea of mateship was that it excluded practically the whole of humanity. In the first place it excluded half the population of Australia first shot up, all the women. It excluded the Aborigines, it excluded Asians, it excluded members of the Jewish community and so on. So I am honoured to be here to deliver the Eric Johnston Lecture because I think he knows, and I think that more and more of us know, that if there is mateship, then it must include women, it must include the coloured people, and it must include the Aborigines. People, Mr Administrator, have loved you and admired you because you are a good mate, and what I have tried to say tonight very imperfectly is that is what we have all got to be.