What does it mean to be an Australian now?

I spoke to a man at a funeral. A man I had known for many years, a distant relative. We began by talking about the problem of water and tanks and dams. Without prompting he said:

‘They’re putting a new road in up near me and everyday this carload of abos comes by to check that they aren’t disturbing something. What a race! Wonder they were sober. Own this country—or used to, they say. Bullshit. Wouldn’t have them anywhere near me. We’re renting out our place at M to a Sudanese family. Lovely people. The agent said, Do you mind that they’re black, I said as long as they aren’t Australian blacks…’

I moved away. A funeral is not the place for confrontation. Indeed, talking to this man had been a concession to the occasion. I usually avoided him. He had a history of drinking and gambling problems, of embezzlement and bankruptcy; and of causing enormous hardship to those close to him. It wasn’t his views that surprised me, but his spontaneous vehemence. That he launched into this conversation was not unconnected with my having written a book about Aboriginal/European colonial contact, of that I was sure. He wanted me to be clear about his views on the subject. But I felt also that the vehemence had an additional target. It was in his language about ownership.

Eight months after Kevin Rudd’s Apology, there is this sense, almost covert now, that some point has been passed. It is not so much the Apology itself, which was directed specifically at apologising for governmental policies of removal of children, but that over a two day period that marked the opening of a new parliament under a new administration, the existence of Aboriginal Australians as the prior proprietary occupiers of this continent, and of the
grave ills settlement has inflicted upon them, were recognised forcefully. The Apology was directed at only one aspect of the injustices and harms done, but following as it did the opening of an Australian Federal Parliament with a Welcome to Country ceremony, it took on the air of a general apology and acknowledgement of the wrongs committed against the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. This was its importance to most of Aboriginal and settler-migrant Australia. State governments had issued apologies but none had done so with the emblematic emphasis.

It was the Welcome to Country ceremony, as much as the long obstinate wait, that gave Rudd’s Apology such force. If the two events had taken place months apart—which they easily could have—the effect would not have been so momentous. Indeed the Welcome ceremony could have rung as hollow tokenism without the Apology happening the following day, and if the Apology had taken place months later, say now, it would have been an answer to a question and not have had the symbolic force it did. It was the combination that deepened the meaning of both events. The Welcome to Country ceremony had a reciprocity about it. The Australian Government’s invitation to Aboriginal Australians to undertake such a ceremony acknowledged ownership while the ceremony itself acknowledged the existence and legitimacy of the administration. This reciprocity would have been hollow without the Apology. Across those two days, dispossession and the injustices of subsequent policies and practices were held up together in the glare of Australian political consciousness. It was the moment when the grievances of Aboriginal Australia were accepted as legitimate by Settler-migrant Australia (which is not the same as saying that these grievances were fully addressed). And it was the moment when, Aboriginal Australia, in seeing this acceptance, saw the real opportunity of being fully part of the Australian polity and not just the subject of that polity’s attention.

And if I say that the sense that a point has been crossed is now almost covert, I mean that while this moment may have to a certain extent receded from memory, it remains tacitly effective on the Australian consciousness. We now see—officially—that this country was owned by peoples whose descendants we accept as still having some kind of claim over it, and we see too that settlement has brought vast hardship to these peoples. This is not to say that all Aboriginal or Settler-migrant Australians endorse the meaning of the moment. There are many on the Aboriginal side who see it as hollow without repatriation, many on both sides who see no great value in symbolic actions, and there are many on the Settler-migrant side, like the man at the funeral, who would see the whole thing as threatening, to be dismissed by proclaiming Aboriginal Australians as without worth and any acknowledgment of their rights as ‘bullshit’.
But if a point has been passed, what does that point represent?

John Hirst argued a few years back, that the Howard government’s refusal to use the word sorry when expressing regret over past relations between Aboriginal and Settler-migrant Australia stood as testament to a man whose lack of imaginative resource will almost certainly be what he is remembered for in the future.¹ Hirst, in an attempt to tease out the nerves of this intransigence, argued for a distinction between an apology for settlement itself and an apology for subsequent (Australian) government policies. The latter, for Hirst, were clearly matters over which the present governments of Australia could apologise if they saw fit, since they were policies which could have been otherwise. Settlement itself, however, was something over which the present Australian polity could not express regret since settlement was a necessary condition for that polity’s existence and, in any case, it was an action taken by a different sovereign power, Britain. Inga Clendinnen dismissed this argument as too simply legalistic.² This is certainly true of the latter part which presumes that at a certain moment the British settlers on this continent mutated into Australians to become a new national species. In a country whose population growth from 1788 on has been substantially the product of new immigration, this is an unconvincing, even if common, assumption. But the first part of Hirst’s argument can not be so easily dismissed, even if we do think it ignores the emotive need of Aboriginal peoples, because it points to a deep conundrum in the present Australian consciousness.

I was invited to join a panel at last year’s Brisbane Writers’ Festival that had been instigated by the activist Sam Watson. Jackie Huggins and Raymond Evans were also on the panel. Sam had given the session the title ‘Captain Cook was the best thing to ever happen to Black Australia!!!’ Preparing for the session I spent some time just looking at this apparently outrageous proposition. And yet, if it was outrageous, what could we do with it? Settlement had happened and for the majority of Settler-migrant Australia it is seen as a good thing that it had. Sam’s mock proposition presented itself as a wall I could not get through. When I met up with Sam, Jackie, and Raymond before the session to discuss how we would approach the session. Sam surprised me—because I did not know him before—with the statement, ‘I thought we would have a bit of fun’. And indeed much of the first part of the session was taken up with many people proposing how much better Australia would now be if it had been settled by say the French (better food), or the Italians (better food and fashion), Captain Cook’s Britishness—and thus by implication Settler-migrant Australia—became the

butt of humour. But the fun could not last around such a topic. Pointing to
the behaviour of the British, or the appalling nature of British cuisine, simply
deflected from the real problem embedded in Watson’s title for the session.
However positivist a view one could take of Australian settlement, the title’s
proposition remains preposterous.

It came down to a fundamental question: Could there have been a just
settlement? Even if the most extreme evangelicals, who described British
colonisation as an atrocity at the time, had been in charge of colonial policies, it
would still not have been a just settlement. Whatever legal fictions, such as Terra
Nullius (more prominent an idea in the twentieth century than the nineteenth),
might or might not have been concocted, most settlers knew the real authority
by which they came to the country. It was a legal principle certainly ancient and
ubiquitous: the right of conquest. The moral authority of Australian settlement
was force of arms. And by settlement I do not mean a small number of outsiders
coming to settle among Aboriginal Australians. I mean the swamping of the
most habitable regions of Australia in a short half century, which even if it had
not led to huge mortalities would have seen the original peoples of the country
reduced to a small minority. Could it in anyway have been seen by Aboriginal
Australians as ‘just’? The answer is surely No.

Yet this settlement happened. It may have been possible for it to have been
less murderous, less Social-Darwinist, less institutionalising, less a myriad of
other injustices, but none of these adjustments to the process of dispossession
would have made for a more just settlement, merely a less ruthless one. And the
settlement that happened is irrevocable. Not just in the sense that the past is
always irrevocable, but in the very real and obvious sense that the vast majority
of the present Australian population are descended from Settler-migrants or are
recent immigrants themselves, and these people, one way or another, hold title
to most of the best country on this continent. It is with this irrevocability that
the present Australian consciousness, Aboriginal or Settler-migrant, must deal.

This is not easy because it comes down to our understanding of our selves. We
are creatures of memory. How we understand ourselves personally and socially
is to a large part determined by how we understand our past. But memories
are fluid. When John Howard introduced an Australian citizen test to ensure
that migrant citizens understood what it meant to be Australian, to understand
‘Australian values’, it was understood that most of the questions would have
to do with aspects of Australian history. The tests for obvious reasons are not
meant to be public knowledge—they are after all tests—but anecdotes, rumours
and logic indicate that the history the tests draw on is a very positive one, which
is not surprising given that the test is about understanding the positive aspects
of being ‘Australian’. In this sense it follows the tradition of positivist history which aims to explain the trajectory which led to a certain achievement. National histories usual follow such trajectories. They aim at a teleological narrative of how events led inevitably to the creation of the present, usually great, nation. Being Australian in this trajectory does not allow that Australia’s foundation act was unjust. For John Howard the overwhelming characteristics of Australianness were a ‘deep rooted sense of fairplay’ and a ‘fair go’ for all.3 Howard was very far from being alone in seeing Australia as a ‘good place’ in which to live with exemplary values. Most Australians, and not without reason, would agree. Yet it is very difficult to integrate this positive concept of the present with a darker view of the past.

One response is defensive. If we identify, as descendents, with the settler society most responsible for dispossession, and, worse still, with members among the settlers who committed violence against Aboriginal Australians, we can naturally become defensive. It is from this settler society, after all, that the values of ‘fairness’ supposedly come. We can evoke something akin to Terra Nullius and throw in for supportive measure a characterisation of Aboriginal Australians as low creatures. This is what the man at the funeral was doing in his rough way. He continued the nineteenth-century characterisation of the Aboriginal Australian as ‘the lowest of the low’. He was not against ‘blacks’; the Sudanese refugees he rented his house to were good people, in part because they made no claim to prior or present ownership of land and, rather than feel aggrieved by Settler-migrant Australia’s treatment of them, had every reason to be grateful. The man at the funeral could look at Aboriginal Australians in the town where he lived and cite beggars and drunks as proof positive of the legitimacy of dispossession. But if this man exhibits simplistic bigotry, more sophisticated equivalents can be found amongst those historians who wish to play down the violence of the frontier or deny that children were removed from their families; those who argue that the number of deaths and massacres have been exaggerated. As I have suggested above, even if the violence is exaggerated it does not overcome the fundamental injustice, settlement itself. To argue over numbers and intentions of violence is a digression, the purpose of which is to balm the positive identification we claim with those we are descended from.

There is a contrasting strategy in which the Settler-migrant Australian can indulge. This is to draw a line between ourselves and the people who dispossessed and murdered. Here defensiveness is replaced by indignation. We can express horror at the behaviour of the people of the past, emphasising as we do so how

different we present folk are. We can even pick individuals from the past for special condemnation. But this strategy of indignation falls down for precisely the same reason as that of defensiveness: it presumes the possibility of a just settlement; it presumes that if we could go back and do it all again we could thwart all the injustice done to Aboriginal people. But this ‘we’ would not exist without the fundamental sin of dispossession.

Neither defensive identification nor righteous indignation solves the conundrum of a recognised but irrevocable injustice. If my great-great-grandparents did participate in atrocities, which is entirely possible, I am not responsible for their actions. We are not the people from whom we are descended, but we inherit a world, public and familial, shaped by the activity of the people of the past, the people from whom we are descended. I continue to benefit from the consequences of injustices by enjoying the affluence of present day Australia, so I cannot simply draw a line between the injustices of the past and my comfortable present. But humans can never draw such a line because we are creatures of memory. A sense of the past, individual and social, is a fundamental of being human. To have a good sense of ourselves, a good self-consciousness, we need to either understand that the past which led to us is fundamentally good or come to some kind of terms with that past if it is a troubled one. This is why the practice of history is so important.

The events of February addressed this conundrum which had been growing in the Australian consciousness over the past two decades or so. For Aboriginal Australia it had been a situation which had existed one way or another since settlement, and about which frustration grew exponentially as it became increasingly obvious that mainstream Settler-migrant Australia now accepted a view of racial relations which would not countenance the kind of injustices that had been committed in the past. If Settler-migrant Australia saw itself as epitomised by the ‘fair go’, Aboriginal Australia’s memory was of a police-state, where freedom of movement was restricted, rights denied and government agencies had free reign. For Settler-migrant Australia, historians from the 1970s on, most prominently Henry Reynolds, have exploded many of the myths of a fundamentally peaceful—even kindly—settlement. This has disturbed as much as it has enlightened and prompted much reaction in response. Some of it is defensive in the mode I talked about above, such as Geoffrey Blainey’s characterisation of it as ‘black armband’ history, or Keith Windschuttle’s denials of violence. It has also unleashed much of the indignation I spoke of above, indignation both at the protagonists of violence in the past and the deniers of the present. This has at times looked like an impasse because it has happened a large part on the margins of society even if it looked to those engaged in it
as if it dominated the world. But it has been an impasse because it is asking something of historians that they cannot do.

It is impossible to come to terms with the past without making judgements. Historians do make judgements upon actions of the past as they examine those actions but these judgements are always tentative, even if the historian does not recognise them as so. As Paul Ricoeur has put it: ‘Judges must come to a conclusion. They must decide…this, historians do not do, cannot do’, for if they were to set ‘themselves up as the sole tribunal of history’ they would deny that writing history is ‘an unending process of revision…a perpetual rewriting.’ Historians provide understandings of the past upon which the broader society must make the judgement. The events of February were the broader Australian society’s judgement.

If the historians have had their battles on the margins, those battles have influenced a more mainstream consciousness. The historiographic controversy that surrounded Kate Grenville’s best selling historical novel, The Secret River, clouded the real significance of the works’ success. It brought alive the conundrum of unjust settlement. If this conundrum had not already been present in the Australian consciousness it would be debatable that the novel would have had the success it did. Criticism of Grenville centred on two things. One was Grenville’s own exaggerated claims for her historical understanding, which amounted to her claiming superiority over historians. I think this is simply a silly conceit. The other was that she misunderstood the past and projected back into the past a modern sensibility. But Grenville is doing what historical fiction usually does. It projects back the present consciousness into the past where it inhabits a coherently constructed world like a tourist with diplomatic immunity. Unmoved by its environment. This is all part of the way we have of conceiving our sense of ourselves in the past. The only thing wrong with it is if we mistake or confuse it with history, which in contrast attempts to uncover past consciousness as much as past acts. And if it is any good it will understand that the world it presents is always less than coherent, one reason for it to curtail judgements.

It is hoped that the events of February will take us past the impasse in which the so called ‘history wars’ entangled us. They contain judgement but more than that they act, not as a logical unravelling of the conundrum of unjust but irrevocable settlement, but as a kind of moral massage which might just help us reconcile ourselves to the past. In doing so it will enable historians to further

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explore the subtleties and depth of that past. The SBS series *First Australians* has just finished airing as I write this. As *The Age* journalist Gabriella Coslovich has pointed out it brings to a wide public much of the conflict that was settlement in this country (although I am not convinced that educated Australia is as ignorant of this history as Coslovich so obviously was before watching the program). To be aware of this history is of critical importance. But for me the disappointing aspect of the series is that in passing over, in what seemed like the first few minutes of the series, tens of thousands of years of human history in Australia—and in doing so underplaying the diversity of its peoples—the opportunity was missed to *demonstrate* Aboriginal Australia before 1788. No doubt there are sensitivities to consider. But to give only a brief overview of some Aboriginal peoples’ mythological and cosmological constructions of the past achieved too little. Would it really have been so difficult to present alongside these accounts, which in themselves should have been much more explored, the archaeological, anthropological and linguistic understandings of this past? With its title, *First Australians*, and its emphasis on the strife of settlement and its aftermath, the program continues the idea that Australia begins in 1788—a kind of continuation of the idea of Western historiography that history begins with writing. It is a show that demands a prequel to lay bare the meaning of prior ownership that lay behind the Welcome to Country ceremony in February.

The most powerful image I have carried in my mind from February was, as I remembered it, of an Aboriginal Australian waving the Australian national flag while standing in front of a giant Aboriginal flag. It was an image I was certain I saw in the media at the time, but when I thought of it, it seemed unreal, as if its inclusive elements were something I had imagined out of hope. After all, as I could see it, the Aboriginal flag was impossibly big, the size of a substantial building which filled the whole background of the picture. It was perhaps too good an image. As I came to write this I searched for it. I found it. It is on the *Australian*’s website archive of that day. It is captioned ‘Kowanyama Aborigine Mary-Jane Holness proudly displays the national flag’. She is on an expanse of mown grass. Behind her is indeed an Aboriginal flag, not of cloth waving as I had imagined it, but painted onto the wall of a two-storey building. In cracks or ledges of the brickwork weeds grow across the yellow circle of the flag and there is a small grated window off to the left. A seagull flies into the air near Ms Holness. Another sits on the ground behind her. The national flag Ms Holness

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7 See the exploration of this idea in Daniel Smail's *On Deep History and the Brain*, (University of California Press, Berkeley 2008).
waves is held aloft on an umbrella. This is a staged picture of course and staged
to illustrate the unifying significance of the Apology. But it is a spontaneous
staging, if the fact that the national flag is held aloft on a folded umbrella means
anything. Other photographs of the crowds assembled outside Parliament House
in Canberra that day show the national flag dotted amongst the crowd along with
Aboriginal flags. The past of this country can no longer be written without these
two flags waving together.

Most of us understand now, if we did not know before the decision in
February, that recognising this past is part of what it means to be an Australian.
It is a recognition that tragedy and injustice mark this past as much as do fair
play and affluence. It is fear of this that produced such vehemence in the
man at the funeral. It was not just the annoyance of Aboriginal people being
involved in overseeing a road construction, it was the challenge this made to his
understanding of the past within himself.