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## **FROM HISTORY TO MYTH: AN AUSTRALIAN TASK?**

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I would like to come at the question of the uses and abuses of history from a slightly different angle, to suggest that it may be history itself, or at least a certain kind of history, which may be the problem and take up Mircea Eliade's proposition:

It is not inadmissible to think of an epoch, and an epoch not too far distant, when humanity, to ensure its survival, will find itself reduced to desisting from any further 'making' of history in the sense in which it began to make it from the creation of the first empires.<sup>1</sup>

and return to the world of myth, a mode of being in the world which goes beyond the merely rational and material to explore meanings and values which have to do with the inner life of the universe and of human beings. I believe that western culture in general and Australian culture in particular has reached that point today. Interestingly and coincidentally, as far as I understand her argument, Germaine Greer seems to be saying something similar in her recent Quarterly Essay in which she argues that the "Aboriginal character of Australia" may be crucial for us as a people and that we need to let ourselves be drawn into their "web of dreams", their mythic sense of reality'.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the current 'History Wars' seem to point to crisis in our understanding of our identity and purpose as a people and some confusion about the way ahead. On the one hand there are those who want to continue on the same path, to defend and reinforce the traditional history which has defined who we are, what we believe in and where we are going. On the other side there is a growing sense that history will no longer serve because it is out of touch with what is actually the case. I am one of these and this is the case I would like to put here and to argue, with Eliade, that we need an alternative to our reliance on history, or, to be more accurate, to the kind of history on which we have relied, imperial history, if we are to survive physically in this environmentally fragile country and spiritually as a decent and civilised society.

To look, then, at imperial history. It is based on the idea of 'progress', of time as an arrow ceaselessly moving forward towards bigger, better and more technologically efficient and materially productive things with people of our kind as its spearhead and all others as 'lesser breeds without the law', 'primitives', 'uncivilised', if not downright evil. According to the logic of this kind of history they are doomed if not to die out as unfit to survive in the 'struggle of the fittest', at least to submit to our rule and direction. A reading of Windschuttle's argument suggests that his account of the early days in Tasmania rests on similar assumptions. As I see it, however, this account is based on what Paul Carter calls a 'fabric of self-reinforcing illusions'.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these is that place does not really matter. Its reality must be subordinated to the logic of 'history', of time driving irresistibly to the future. That is not to say that the settlers were not aware of their physical situation. Indeed the theme of most of the early descriptions was the strangeness of this new country. Marcus Clarke, for instance, famously saw the landscape not only as 'Grotesque ... Weird' and inchoate but also as beyond the bounds of reason. The Book of Nature seemed closed here. It was possible only to discern 'the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write'.<sup>4</sup> It is true that

Clarke and others like him, most notably writers and painters, were aware, therefore, of a mystery to be explored here and set themselves to do so – in that sense anticipating Eliade's intuition. But that was not the official view then or indeed now. What mattered was economic progress to which the physical reality of the place was to be subordinated. As Carter puts it, the land was simply an empty stage on which 'progress was to unfold, the drama involved in "building a new Britannia in another world", a scenario based on fantasies of power, possession and pleasure'.<sup>5</sup> Before us, this script declared, the land had been empty and bereft of inhabitants – or, at least, of people who could be counted as 'civilised' – *terra nullius*. But with our arrival it became a 'vision splendid of sunlit plains extended', to be filled with sheep and cattle, farms and cities, imposed upon and transformed for our purposes.

It is now becoming apparent, however, that that was to ignore the actual nature of the land, not only what it was capable of but also what it asked of us, with the result that we have largely to develop what Greer calls 'a considerate and viable use of country',<sup>6</sup> as its First Peoples did. The disastrous environmental consequences of this failure are now becoming evident. But this denial of the reality of the land also leads to a denial of the existence and existential claims of the other, the Aboriginal peoples who had lived in and with the land for at least 40 000 years. Imperial history is essentially a monologue, an ideology of closure, and all other voices apart from those of the conquerors are excluded. So Aboriginal voices and the wisdom they had acquired over thousands of years were ignored and written out of the record, dismissed as ignorant savages, the assumption being that, as the recent judgement on the claim of the Yorta Yorta people of northern Victoria expressed it, the tide of history – imperial history, that is – had flowed over them and swept their claims and culture away. Ironically, today the effects of our culture of 'development' and our misuse of the land suggest that we are the ones who may be 'swept away' and that we may have much to learn from Aboriginal culture.

The imperial history by which we have largely defined ourselves, then, has put us out of touch with reality. We may like to think of ourselves as explorers, people who take physical risks. But psychologically, our culture is defensive, a 'circle around sameness' – as many of our writers have suggested. One thinks, for instance, of A D Hope's image of

... a vast parasite robber state  
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate  
Timidly on the edge of alien shores<sup>7</sup>

or of Patrick White's picture of a people clinging to the fringes of the self as we cling to the fringes of the continent, shrinking from 'the deep end of the unconscious'.<sup>8</sup> It is at least possible that this has a great deal to do with the disabling lack of compassion, the paranoia and indifference to the truth increasingly evident today in public and private life and of the eagerness to be drawn into the imperial history US President Bush seems to be intent on imposing on the world. But an underlying, if unacknowledged, suspicion that our position may in fact be unsustainable may also fuel the bitterness of the arguments about the nature of our history and the distaste of many, our Prime Minister included, for any interrogation of the official version: it is a painful thing to have one's superstitions or, if you prefer, one's faith, called into question if there are no rational grounds for them.

Thus, for instance, we like to think that we live in a society based on legal decree and that law is a rational thing. The problem is, as Margaret Simons observes in her discussion of the Hindmarsh Island Affair, that the concept of *terra nullius*, until recently the legal basis for our occupation of the country, was not rational but 'more of a superstition or an act of faith, because it was quite out of kilter with the observable facts. The [Aboriginal peoples] were still there. The settlers knew this, even as the law did not know it.'<sup>9</sup> The fact that in the Mabo judgement the High Court acknowledged this only increases the problem, increasing the unacknowledged anxiety also, and this is yet another reason why it is urgently necessary to find an alternative to imperial history, embrace a different world view.

In my view there is a good deal of truth in Greer's argument that we have much to learn from Aboriginal culture. But, first of all, we must come to terms with ourselves and our situation, learn to embrace the shadow side of our history and to challenge the illusions of imperial history not only in the name of truth but also in the name of humanity, our own as well as that of those whose humanity

we have denied. As Krygier and Van Krieken point out, 'the situation imperial history creates is fraught with tragedy'.<sup>10</sup> The effects of our arrival and occupation of the country have been devastating for its First Peoples inhabitants. Most fair-minded observers would probably agree that that has been established beyond reasonable doubt, not only by the facts revealed by revisionist historians like Henry Reynolds during the History Wars but also by government inquiries like the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody and the inquiry into the 'Stolen Generation'. But they have been devastating, though in a very different way, for us also – at least if one accepts Emmanuel Levinas' argument that to be properly human one needs to have a respect for and be responsible to the other. The imperial view, however, has occluded this realisation. I would suggest therefore that if we are to recover the humanity evidently lacking in our culture – at least at a public level – today we may need to acknowledge the truth of Levinas' words:

My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun', my being at home, have these not only been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other ... whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?<sup>11</sup>

That means giving up what, writing in the aftermath of World War II, Karl Jasper called the 'murderous uprightness' of a culture of conquest, a culture which had loaded on to history the 'grandeur stolen from God',<sup>12</sup> and become aware of and responsible to the 'face of the other'<sup>13</sup> and also, I would suggest, of the Other, the ultimately mystery of Being to which we are also responsible.

This may sound 'mystical' and therefore suspect in a culture which likes to think of itself as secular and is – in my opinion rightly – suspicious of religious fundamentalism. But I would argue that it is in tune with a strain which has run through our Australian culture, and run counter to imperial history which puts a premium on the 'winners', the notion of a 'fair go' and even, if we widen its ambit, of 'mateship' – notions so firmly entrenched that our Prime Minister likes to exploit them for his own purposes. Where the reliance on imperial history has largely ignored it to focus on economic development, this strain has taken up the task which Eliade, to refer to him again, sees as crucial for any people newly arrived in a place hitherto unknown to them, the 'transformation of chaos into cosmos',<sup>14</sup> in other words to discover a world view which encompasses reality as a whole, to move beyond the bounds of mere rationality, to be 'alive to blinding flashes of mortality' and the complexity and mystery of the cosmos of which we are a part, to be 'unarmed, totally vulnerable'.<sup>15</sup>

To pick up Greer's point again, traditional Aboriginal cultures have a cosmic sense of this kind, especially with their sense of the sacredness of land and the living world around us and we would do well to share in this to the extent that we are able to do so. But before we do this there is the ethical obligation to acknowledge the extent of our obligation to them and our responsibility for what has happened to them since our arrival, the abuses which have flowed from our trust in imperial history. Until we acknowledge that, the ideal we also cherish of establishing a free and just society will be beyond us. In the long run I believe that the Good Society is an ethical society, one which acknowledges obligations to the other as well as rights. If that is so, then the history which is most important is not the story of the winners but of the losers. That is especially the case with us since part of the task we have set ourselves is to build a free society. The story of human suffering – which, we have been suggesting, imperial history ignores – is an integral part, indeed, as J B Metz puts it, 'an inner aspect of *the* history of freedom', to the extent that 'the imagination of future freedom is nourished from the memory of suffering'. Even more to the point, if we consider the fact that imperial history tends to obliterate this memory, is Metz's further point that freedom and the possibilities of freedom degenerate wherever those who suffer are treated more or less as a cliché and degraded to a faceless mass.<sup>16</sup>

That, to return to where we began, is why we need to cease from any further 'making' of imperial history and why the true story of our dealings with Aboriginal people may be crucial to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. Whether or not for 200 years, as Greer says, the First Peoples have been 'seducing [us] white fellas, subtly drawing [us] into their web of dreams',<sup>17</sup> we need first of all to listen to the 'still small voices' within our culture and tradition which have been drowned out by the blare of imperial trumpets and move beyond history to a larger, more tragic and

therefore more realistic sense of reality and value which speaks of obligation to one another and to the natural world and acknowledges that we are part of and responsible to the fabric of life as a whole.

- <sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, Princeton University Press, 1974, p 153.
- <sup>2</sup> Germaine Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2003.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, Faber & Faber, London, 1987, p xiv.
- <sup>4</sup> Marcus Clarke, Preface to *Poems of the late Adam Lindsay Gordon* in Ian Turner (ed), *The Australian Dream*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968, p 102.
- <sup>5</sup> Carter, p xiv.
- <sup>6</sup> Greer, p 26.
- <sup>7</sup> A D Hope, 'Australia' in H P Heseltine (ed), *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1979, p 190.
- <sup>8</sup> Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, Jonathan Cape, 1981, p 104.
- <sup>9</sup> Margaret Simons, *The Meeting of the Waters: The Hindmarsh Island Affair*, Hodder, Sydney, 2003, p 20.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Krygier & Robert van Krieken, 'Terra Nullius reborn' in Robert Manne (ed), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2003.
- <sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, Sean Hand (ed), Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, p 82.
- <sup>12</sup> Lotte Kohler & Hans Saner (eds), *Correspondence: Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1992, pp 148–49.
- <sup>13</sup> Levinas, p 83.
- <sup>14</sup> Eliade, p 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Diana Cooper, *Trumpets from the Steep*, 1960, Chapter 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, Seabury Press, New York, 1980, pp 112–13.
- <sup>17</sup> Greer, p 4.