A Beginning

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Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan (eds)
*Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand*
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This book capitalises on the recent interest in indigenous history and storytelling. Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan have compiled a satisfying, well-rounded and important collection. The Introduction outlines their aims while contextualising the project. *Telling Stories* grew out of an awareness that the relationship between the past and the present has become increasingly contentious, and that control of historical knowledge production has emerged as a central concern for indigenous and settler historians (and storytellers) alike. Although the editors note, somewhat cautiously, that there is ‘nothing new about indigenous story-telling or history-making’, the ensuing ten chapters reject this claim. Attwood’s chapter on the ‘stolen generations narratives’, for example, clearly demonstrates that there is much that is new. Overall, the collection, despite some unevenness in scholarship, shows that much is still to be learned.

In chapter one, Penny van Toorn considers ‘Indigenous Australian Life-writing’, and observes that ‘as far back as 1796, Aboriginal people were recounting small segments of their lives in piecemeal, fragmentary written forms’. Van Toorn demonstrates the enormous value of this archive as she grapples to understand the production and reception of this material. By combining her personal experience as an editor (she worked with Ruby Langford and her son Nobby on *Haunted by the Past*) with a close reading of what she terms ‘tactical texts’, she has written a sophisticated and subtle exploration of the political and cultural issues that affect the production of Aboriginal life-writing. This is a significant piece of work and should be mandatory reading for all those engaged in studying Aboriginal texts.

Ann Parsonson’s chapter, ‘Stories for Land’, explores the recording of oral narratives in the minute book of the Maori Land Court. Parsonson shows that there is a fundamental disjuncture between the oral form and its translation into text. Perhaps one of the most important aspects that defined translation was the ‘emotional energy’, which ‘often disappeared’ when words went from a verbal to a written form. The conversion of oral narrative to written text deprived the Maori of any justice: ‘Either they [the old people] stayed away and lost their land, or they attended, gave evidence, secured a Crown
certificate of title, and took the first steps to major land loss.’

A different sort of storytelling is explored in Magowan’s chapter on Yolngu song. Amongst the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land, to sing is to ‘know’. Knowing is ‘making sense of the world and everything in it’. Magowan writes in a melodic manner, her sentences almost replicate the ‘poetic event clusters’ that form her subject material. This is particularly evident in her analysis of crying to remember:

Memories, then, do not begin with the utterance of a song, or end with the completion of it as resonance, as a song is not a finite or complete process. It is a moment of utterance, a moment of recognition, a glimpse of invoking things past as a fragment of the present, where memories persist as a sense of eco-place in which the resonances of people-as-ancestors and people-as-places return to the ancestors in song, to be recalled again at the next funeral by crying to remember.

As Magowan eloquently shows, Yolngu storytelling is as much about the practice itself as about its content.

Captain Cook is the subject of Deborah Bird Rose’s chapter, a reworking of her hugely influential article from 1984, which explored the many and varied ways in which Captain Cook has acquired the status of iconic European invader. Aboriginal communities in isolated locations never visited by Cook were found by Rose to have local Cook stories. These narratives were not about Cook per se, but about colonial relationships. Cook became the exemplar of European dispossession and disruption. In this revised version, Rose demonstrates that the Captain Cook saga speaks to black and white Australians as it ‘seeks to re-establish the recognition and implementation of moral principles, to restate freedom and autonomy for all Australians through what might be called a multi-cultural system of autonomous and interrelated parts’.

Judith Binney’s chapter considers the production of what she terms her ‘unanticipated trilogy’. For more than twenty years, Binney’s writing has dealt with Maori history and the construction of Maori narratives. Binney reflects on the shifts in New Zealand history, and the influence that Maori voices have had on that history. Through her case studies, she demonstrates the ‘autonomy of the Maori world’, which has never been completely subsumed in the colonial state. Importantly, Binney recalls that each of her three books ‘evolved out of dialogues, through time’, and shows us that the dialogue continues even after a text has been printed. Together with the chapters by W.H. Oliver, Andrew Eruit and Alan Ward, Binney’s illustrates that current New Zealand/ Maori history is not only intellectually engaging, but also politically and socially responsible.

The chapters by Jeremy Beckett and Basil Sansom take the production of one individual’s life story as their subject matter. For Sansom, it is the Roy Kelly story, while Beckett focuses on Myles Lalor’s oral history. Beckett has recently published a book on the life of Lalor, based on some 70,000 words of transcribed audiotapes. Here, he considers the production of that book and reflects on the editorial decisions he had to make in the absence of Lalor, who died after the taping had concluded. Perhaps the most important thing Beckett does is to remind us that our ‘anxiety stems from a preoccupation with difference between indigenous and non-indigenous to the point of disregarding the common ground that makes communication possible’. It is that common ground that Beckett and Sansom help us to identify and negotiate.

The final chapter in the book is by Bain Attwood. It is timely and important. Although he runs the risk of being criticised or labelled politically incorrect, Attwood is unflinching in his analysis of the ‘stolen generations narratives’. He argues that the emergence of these narratives in the 1990s was not inevitable but, rather, the result of ‘narrative coalescence’ or accrual. Attwood systematically analyses the circulation among the wider population of these stories of child removal, arguing convincingly that they have homogenised an otherwise highly heterogeneous experience. He warns that not to reflect on this phenomenon might well fuel the revisionists’ fire and permit a dismissal of the experiences altogether. Although the material in this chapter is contentious and challenging, it is essential reading. We should all be grateful to Attwood for his courage to say what might have remained ‘unsayable’.

On the whole, this is an important collection — uneven, but such is the state of historiography in the two locales under consideration. Unfortunately, there is no attempt to conduct a comparative analysis of memory and history in the settler colonies of New Zealand and Australia. Perhaps, however, in this book, we have the beginnings. The future may well witness the emergence of new understandings of how we tell stories, and why.