Reconciling ruin

The first Tasmanian Aboriginal authors ever to be published were Thomas Bruny and Walter George Arthur in the Flinders Island Chronicle in 1837. At the time they were in mandatory detention at Wybalenna, a veritable concentration camp established to house Tasmanian Aboriginal people whose only crime was to have trespassed on their own land.

Let me quote a small excerpt from the first issue:

10 September, 1837

In commencing our Journal agreeable to the prospectus we cannot look back on the events connected with our history; this we leave with the Divine blessing to the heart and head that has been instrumental in uniting us together and providing us with instruction guiding us into the habits of civilised life and the enjoyment of security from the oppression of bad men. We date our history of events from the month of October, 1835 when our beloved father made his appearance amongst us... (cited in Plomley 1987, 1009).

The ‘beloved father’ was the camp Commandant – Tasmania's first grand ‘Conciliator’, George Augustus Robinson - personally responsible for their deportation and now editor and publisher of their ‘new lives’.

Since then almost nothing has been published by Tasmanian Aboriginal writers – perhaps until Aunty Ida West’s Pride Against Prejudice in 1984 and The Spirit of Kuti Kina by Jim Everett and Karen Brown in 1988. Aunty Ida’s book was about the challenges of trying to fit in to white culture - summed up so well by her story of how, as a young girl, she would use Ponds creams to whiten her face in the hope of being asked for a dance. Jim and Karen have always written fiercely about the struggle for justice and the will to win in the face of pressure to assimilate.

But they are all - I would suggest - writing from the ruins.

According to Christopher Woodward (2001), when we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. But ruins are not only collections of material culture in advancing disorder. They are also manifest in the disruption of the mental maps with which we hold together our conceptions of nation, community and self. Reconciliations occur in response to rurations of cultural frameworks – massive disruptions in the lives of a discernable group: discernable to those who perpetrate the act of ruination. Reconciliations are practiced by those who, in so doing, continue to discern the group and their linkage to ruin. Most importantly, however, Reconciliation involves a group who discern themselves – who identify as victim and survivor. Aboriginal people live among these ruins, but contemplate their futures beyond a foreground characterised by turmoil and injustice.

Ruins can also be seductive places. They are fascinating intersections of contradictory culture, belief and practice. They are the social eco-clines. The interstices, the discontinua, the borders along which humanity has always clustered - drawn like moths to the dimly smouldering wreckage left by conflict and destruction – eager to be part of the new growth, change and innovation which inevitably emerges.

The poet Shelley – writing of the Baths of Caracalla in Prometheus Unbound – describes the experience:

Never was any desolation more sublime and lovely. The perpendicular wall of ruin is cloven into steep ravines filled with flowering shrubs whose thick twisted roots are knotted in the rifts of the stones (cited in Woodward 2001).

Shelley’s rich narrative is one of mystery, life and beauty in a precipitous landscape where history will take root and flourish regardless of the intent of the perpetrator of destruction.

Reconciliation offers entrée to the ruins of antiquity for the visitor whose roots are elsewhere. It offers the excitement and challenge of the Tomb Raider - a chance to enter into the very fabric of an other culture’s defining destructive experience. But it is an engagement which is optional – from which one may withdraw at any time when one’s appetite for redemption is satisfied and the sense of self is bolstered. For some participants, a desire for justice is secondary to the pleasure to be gained in exploration.

Those who have had their world reduced to ruin, or whose history is predicated on ruin, may also, like Shelley, find beauty and inspiration among these ruins. This is an essential part of the process of transformation from victim to survivor – to find new growth and redefinition emerging from the wreckage of history. For all participants in the process of Reconciliation, there can be a sense of adventure. But such an environment, fertile with desire for pleasure, is also the ground upon which consumer culture will flourish.
I was in Sydney just after the first Reconciliation Bridge Walk – and the city was still reverberating with feeling. I kept meeting up with people who had walked the walk and were continuing to talk the talk. The whole of Australia, it seemed, even if they weren’t able to get to the bridge, had something to say about it. It was impossible to ignore – no matter what your views on Reconciliation or the need for a national apology to Aborigines.

It was an unmitigated success. All Australians should have been there. But something worried me. Something has worried me for the whole life of the Reconciliation Process.

On my way to Sydney, I was reading Tom Vanderbilt’s ‘The Advertised Life’. It started with a quote from George Orwell’s Keep the Aspidistra Flying:

> He would forget his fine disgusts, cease to rage against the tyranny of money - cease to be aware of it, even - cease to squirm at the ads for Bovex and breakfast crisps. He would sell his soul so utterly that he would forget it had ever been his.

Vanderbilt’s ‘Advertised Life’ is, he says,

> An emerging mode of being in which advertising not only occupies every last negotiable public terrain, but in which it penetrates the cognitive process, invading consciousness to such a point that one expects and looks for advertising, learns to live life as an ad, to think like an advertiser, and even to anticipate and insert oneself in successful strategies of marketing. The advertised life is not merely what you see on television, it is what the television sees.

So what has this got to do with Reconciliation? I am worried about Vanderbilt’s suggestion that we are ‘living inside a perpetual marketing event’.

According to the Harvard Business Review, we now live in a ‘marketspace’ (Rayport and Svioka 1994). A consensual hallucination where product becomes place, becomes promotion. In marketspace the context, or cultural surroundings – not the content – is what attracts advertisers. Once brand loyalty is established at the context level, the number of promotional opportunities blossoms exponentially.

My worry is that Reconciliation is occurring far too much inside this marketspace. Reconciliation is the content – which does not really matter to the advertiser – who in this case is a government seeking to avoid the moral implications of the past. How can we be relaxed in going along with a Reconciliation Process – when years of consensual effort by Black and White Australians culminates in a National Statement of Reconciliation whose fate rests with the Prime Minister’s Red Pen?

OUT goes the word ‘sorry’! OUT goes the reference to ‘customary law’! OUT goes the acknowledgment of ‘self-determination’! Our Prime Minister is working like an advertising copywriter – making adjustments to the context. Neo-colonial Australia has finished occupying vast tracts of land. It is now seeking out new frontier territories in the mental and built environment. Places to plant its brand-label flags in a nation-building exercise where the culture of the oppressed becomes a commodity to assuage the guilt of the invader.

All this of course assumes that there is a fairly seamless relationship between the corporate world and government. Both seem to act with imperial arrogance. They believe that if there is a space in society that is not currently being used to sell a product or policy, then it is theirs to exploit. This is the Terra Nullius of neo-colonial Australia – and we are all victims this time.

The invention by Clyde Holding and Bob Hawke of Reconciliation as a substitute for a treaty has slowly generated a brand loyalty to the process in a context which we are encouraged to believe is unquestionably desirable and beyond reproach. The Aborigine and his cultural surroundings have become immutably acceptable. Corporatised cultural icon Ernie Dingo prompts the tourist – the Tomb Raider – in us to spend our money on adventure and exploration. Multi-coloured dot paintings adorn our quilt covers. Jumbo Jets in Aboriginal T-shirts fly through our Dreaming on unauthorised flight paths – hijacked by copy-writing, graphic-designing terrorists. Even the most radical activist can be accommodated in a vanguard-friendly marketspace. They are an assurance that we can occupy a safe ideological middle ground by embracing the seduction of Reconciliation. The atrocious indicators of Australia’s failure for Aborigines – housing, health, imprisonment, suicide – are co-opted and become reasons to believe in Reconciliation and buy its products, even though little changes as a result. It becomes an hegemonising juggernaut of national proportion. A new vehicle for assimilation.

Is John Howard’s Reconciliation an oppression much like the conciliation of George Augustus Robinson? I fear that our belief in social reform is also being co-opted towards perpetuating that oppression by appealing to the Australian sense of adventure and thrust for national identity. On the question of a national apology the semantic game between the ‘sincere and deep regret’ team and the ‘sorry’ team distracts us from the real issues.

The Aboriginal leaders who have stayed on the outside of the Reconciliation marketspace are all saying the same thing – that the business of conciliation must be dragged back to where it began. Australia still has no treaty with its Indigenous nations. This is Howard’s worst fear and the one he must be confronted with. But there is hope. Reconciliation has been dragged some way lately into respectable territory. The great bridge walks were not planned by a government committee. They were not part of the strategy. They were a break-out of democracy – priceless and joyous to behold. I suspect that the people have had enough of government agendas and welfare bureaucracies. They have taken things into their own hands. They have written ‘SORRY’ in the skies and crossed the rivers and waters en masse. Let’s hope that all of this is just too big for the copy-writers and spin-doctors to subjugate.

Can we avoid the danger of the cross-cultural dialogue of Reconciliation being co-opted by politicians and capitalists? The answer, I believe, exists in reaching better understandings with Aboriginal people themselves and the diversity of their experiences and identities. But how are we to understand Aborigines when, as Marcia Langton (1993) points out, most Australians know only how to relate to stories about Aborigines? What is the cultural adventurer to make of Indigenous people today? What is it to be an Aborigine?

There is contention amongst some scholars about what a contemporary Aborigine can possibly be. Indeed, there is contention within the Aboriginal community about who an Aborigine really is. The very notion that Aborigines are not adequately defined should give us cause to wonder whether Aboriginal identity itself has been invaded and colonised. For the most part in Australia, Aborigines are defined by a
Commonwealth government definition – cobbled together in order to give the national government a bureaucratic ability to administer the new responsibilities conferred on it by the 1967 referendum.

But it is surely a contradiction for the identity of Indigenous people to exist solely as a reflection of the mechanics of colonial policy. There must be more.

History paints a picture of Aborigines as victims of dispossession and atrocity. In the Tasmanian situation Lyndall Ryan and Henry Raynolds have done more than most modern historians to paint a more sophisticated picture – of Aborigines as pro-active and self-determined in their resistance to invasion. But this all occurs with colonisation as the dominant referent. It is a colonial history – not an Aboriginal one.

So where is the Aboriginal history? Well, Aborigines too have had difficulty in escaping from the colonial backdrop. Perhaps escape is now impossible. So much of what informs contemporary Aboriginal identity has become dominated by the struggle against oppression. The Aboriginal experience is mostly articulated as an account of survival. Often in its more vibrant articulations it is a celebration of survival. But take the colonial referent away and it becomes almost meaningless.

Glimpses of the Aboriginal experience outside of the colonial framework can be found in contemporary Aboriginal literature and visual art – in the gaps between the experiences which Aborigines are expected to be subject. Rather than feeling restricted to making art about racism and justice and politics and self-determination, Aborigines are increasingly communicating the Indigenous experience of family, the Indigenous experience of memory and the spirituality which underlies identity. Most Australians have encountered little of this. What is the Indigenous experience of love – of beauty? What is the Indigenous vision of a future outside of colonisation? This is a difficult one because colonisation is so pervasive for Aborigines. It is hard to extricate oneself from the colonial context. It has become part of our very definition. We are not part of the post-colonial. We are still being colonised.

The colonial experience for Aborigines is not just about destruction. It is also about reconstruction – and herein lies a danger. In the Tasmanian context, the reconstruction has had to be almost complete – there was so little left of the law, mythology and ritual of tribal people here. The experience over the last 150 years has generated a new mythology – which has drawn on the experience of invasion and cultural survival. An identity is constructed, in the presence of – and for – a spectator. There is a performative dimension. An identity is staged. There is a spectacle. Guy Dubord was among the first to circulate this notion of a spectacle with the publication of Society of the Spectacle in 1967. According to Edward Ball, editor of Lusitania, Dubord described the spectacle in terms of its panoramic landscape of advertising and television – an image world that transforms lived experience, depletes it and finally substitutes a homogeneous performance of consumption in its place. Dubord 'observed the spreading out of the rule of exchange to the furthest precincts of daily life' (Ball 1995). Jean Baudrillard picked up on this and suggested a realm of simulation, where representations via the media can offer an enthralling, even participative performance that does not link up with phenomenal reality. This is a performance in which we are all offered a role, existing in the marketspace of Reconciliation.

The spectacle of Reconciliation offers an enthralling encounter with Otherness. A shock of encounter with injustice and ambiguity and an opportunity for self-consciousness – for naming 'Otherness' and a defining moment for individual identity – what 'I' am versus what 'They' are. Importantly, this encounter also offers an opportunity for absorption of Otherness – an act of self-creation nourished by assimilation. This is the so-called 'sharing of culture' that occurs as a consequence of the cross-cultural nature of Reconciliation. An exchange occurs, in which support for Reconciliation is traded for access to Indigenous cultural and intellectual property hitherto protected. But it is a sharing that is suspect in its equity, given the privilege and power inherent in the dominant culture of white Australia, and the value attached to economic outcomes.

I am persuaded by Stuart Hall's contention that only a non-unified conception of identity allows a proper understanding of the traumatic character of the colonial experience. According to Hall 'cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture... Not an essence but a positioning'.

Aborigines are positioned between the shifting tides of oppression and conciliation – between rejection and denial. We are caught in the celebratory embrace of those seeking adventure in the ruins of their own creation, while at the same time desiring emancipation and redemption through the process of Reconciliation. But mostly we are drained by the willingness of the market to facilitate the emergence of new product based on what we have fought so hard to maintain. This is the ultimate price we have to pay for a type of Reconciliation that we did not ask for – a commodification of our own ruin.

References


