

POST-COLONIALISM AND THE NATIVE BORN

Peter Read¹

Department of History
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia

Abstract/Resume

A recent court decision in Australia, *Mabo*, has changed the legal equation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. For some years a group of Australians have worked towards the creation of a formal Treaty to define relations among all Australians. The author calls for negotiations now that the High Court has ended the colonial period through *Mabo*.

Une décision judiciaire récent en Australie, *Mabo*, a changé d'équation légale entre les Australiens aborigènes et non-aborigènes. Pendant quelques années un groupe d'Australiens a travaillé en cherchant la création d'un traité formel pour définir les relations parmi tous les Australiens. L'auteur demande des négociations maintenant que la Cour Suprême a terminé la période coloniale au moyen de *Mabo*.

In 1983, Dr H.C. Coombs, Chair of the Australian Aboriginal Treaty Committee, proposed three reasons why non-Aboriginal Australians should support a Treaty between the possessors and the dispossessed.² Two concerned past misdeeds: the unrequited initial act of invasion and the unrequited physical and administrative violence since 1788. The third Coombs saw not as a necessary moral act, but as a legal safeguard for the invaders:

We've become accustomed to think of our occupancy of the land as legal, justified and secure. I think, again, each of those assumptions can be brought into doubt. And therefore I think we have to consider that the kind of security we feel in the occupation of the land at the present time, may very well be called in question, certainly by Aborigines, perhaps by White people here, but also by nations overseas....And therefore if we wish to feel secure, and for our children and grandchildren to feel secure, then I think we have to establish the justification, the legitimacy of our occupation. And that means the legitimacy of our relationship with the original inhabitants, the Aborigines.³

Since the late 1960s Aborigines had been articulating their own attachments and claims to the land much more aggressively and explicitly, and the failure by non-Indigenous Australians to reach a legal settlement left an increasing number, like Coombs, with the feeling that their own attachments to the land had been blunted. Their love of their native land had not been legitimised. How could the burglars remain in occupation of a house which they came to rob two centuries ago? How could they leave? Could the land be unstolen? How could their own attachments be reconciled to Aboriginal understanding—and claims to sovereignty?

Strangely, Coombs' proposal that non-Aboriginal Australians should consider a formal Treaty for *mutual* benefit, rather than for the benefit of Aborigines alone, was forgotten. When the High Court's *Mabo* decision was handed down in 1992, the principle of negotiation was forgotten again.⁴ The Court's judgement indicated that unalienated Crown Land and some forms of leasehold were claimable, or rather, re-claimable, because Native Title was held to exist unless it had been formally extinguished by a valid exercise of sovereign power. Land so claimable included state and federal Crown land, some coastal waters and mineral leases. It was a major concession whose ramifications would be felt for decades. But the Federal Government's Native Title legislation, which broadly followed the principles of the *Mabo* judgement, raised no question of the *mutual* benefit of settlement.⁵

For a few months the Indigenous people considered concessions to

the non-Indigenous: in return for a Commonwealth veto over new grants of Crown land and the vesting of Aboriginal Reserves in Native Title, Aboriginal leaders said they might validate mineral licenses granted since 1975. Then the moral parameters were re-set: the non-Indigenous were sorry and the Indigenous should be grateful. A year later the mineral license question had been buried as surely as Coombs' proposal, in state challenges to the federal Native Title legislation and the complex setting of guidelines for the arbitrating Land Tribunals. Non-Aboriginal Australians still speak in terms of restitution, reconciliation and justice by them to the Indigenous peoples as if the Aborigines, not they, were the ones with the problem of belonging in Australia. Aborigines speak as if they, the injured party, have nothing to bargain. Though it is clear, even to long-time supporters of Aboriginal causes, that Indigenous sovereignty is out of the question,⁶ there remains room for negotiation.

On one side of the balance, the non-Aborigines hold the physical force. On the other, the Aborigines possess the moral right to the land, and it is the land itself that the non-Indigenous are symbolically denied. Many Aborigines regard other Australians not so much as unwelcome as irrelevant. In some areas non-Aborigines are not formally introduced to traditional country because "whitefellers don't need to be introduced." Urban Aboriginal groups ask each other for permission to enter their country for conferences, but whether non-Aborigines do or not is immaterial. The Indigenous singer Archie Roach sings of the unity of wildlife, the bush black Australians and the earth:

Do you remember Joseph Banks⁷
 Who stood upon this sacred earth
 And what he felt inside when he looked around and saw
 The land to whom we give our thanks
 Our motherland who's given birth
 To trees and plants and animals
 He'd never seen before.

The "native born" are Aborigines:

But no one knows and no one hears
 The way we used to sing and dance
 And how the gum trees stood and stretched
 To meet the golden morn
 And motherland still sheds her tears
 For lives that never stood a chance
 And Albert Namatjira⁸ cries, as we all cry
 The native born.⁹

Non-Aboriginal Australians, in Roach's construction, live in Australia—but

they do not belong in Australia.

For many years the issue of moral belonging has been obscured. Nineteenth and early 20th century Aboriginal Reserve land was declared by Acts of state or federal parliament, not claimed. From the 1970s, state Aboriginal Land Rights Acts (where they existed at all) formally created or returned Aboriginal living areas or mission stations to secure title such as inalienable freehold. The return of these lands could not be challenged in the courts. The *Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* allows no counter-claim by non-Aborigines once “traditional ownership” of claimable land has been demonstrated to the Land Commissioner’s satisfaction.¹⁰ Even the federal Native Title legislation appears to allow claims in southern Australia only on small areas of Crown land to which an actual physical or historical Aboriginal presence can be demonstrated.

Some *pakeha* New Zealanders tried to resolve the nexus by claiming both the moral and physical sides of the balance. In 1989 the Ngai Tahu tribal claimants, seeking a legitimization of their claim to part of the Waitangi Tribunal, received a counterclaim from the *pakeha* high country farmers that they shared the same attachment to the land as the Maoris:

If any group of New Zealanders can claim to be the [I]ndigenous people of the pastoral lease perhaps it is the lessees themselves as they are the only people in the history of New Zealand to have actually settled on and worked the land in question (Levine, 1990:5).

Another farmer:

Like the Maori, I too have been brought up and moulded on the myths and facts, traditions and innovations...passed down by successive bosses, managers, shepherds and wives. I believe my feeling for the land and for the peoples who also live and work there is of an order that the Maori people would understand (*Ibid.*).

Would the Maori want to understand? A commentary by ten anthropologists of the New Zealand Anthropological Association noted that the farmers had ignored the fundamental economic and political dispossession which led to the establishment of their culture in the first place (*Ibid.*:3).

Another way to sidestep the Aboriginal moral claim was to imagine that the Indigenous people had ceased to exist. That was easy: the assumption of *terra nullius*, by which the British Crown justified its declaration of sovereignty, foreshadowed emotional attachments to the land unencumbered by Aboriginal attachments as surely as the doctrine implied legal title unencumbered by Native title. In the imagination of many writers, the “native-born” were plants, animals, European Australians—but not Aborig-

ines. Few characters in Australian literature, for example, loved the country more passionately than the writer Eve Langley, yet no Aborigine was granted a significant place in her 1945 novel *The Pea Pickers*. Aborigines to Langley simply didn't matter. In her poem "Native Born" she lamented that she had no "native song" to mourn the death of a kangaroo whose corpse she discovered. In a day long ceremony she conducted the kangaroo's immolation according to funeral rites of her own imagination. The native born, the bush, the wildlife and Langley herself—but not Aborigines—were mystically comminuted in the pyre:

I burnt her with the logs, and stood all day
 Among the ashes, pressing home the flame
 Till woman, logs and dreams were scorched away,
 And native with night, the land from whence they
 came (Langeley, 1986:50-51).

Another Australian novelist of the 1930s-1940s was Eleanor Dark. When her country was threatened with Japanese invasion in 1942, she contrasted an intuitive love of the land ("conviction") with the rational acknowledgement of the facts of invasion in a free association of ideas of attachment. Within a paragraph of *The Little Company* the non-Aborigines were first the "stepchildren" of the bush, then the "first invaders," then the mystical inheritors:

Standing in the bed of one such creek, ...he [Gilbert Massey] thought how triumphantly, despite its grim moods, [the bush] had captured and held the imaginations and love of its stepchildren—...He asked himself—with his mind—whether after a few generations Japanese might not also become quite different from their countrymen "at home," perhaps treating it better than it had been by its first invaders. Yet thinking such things and feeling them were, he acknowledged, entirely different. His mind could tell him that the Aborigines were the real Australians, just as the Red Indians were the real Americans; his conviction still said: No. The country is here inside my body, and its air is the breath out of my lungs.¹¹

Forty years later the poet Bob Brissenden also occupied, and loved, a land apparently empty of the "real Australians." The Aboriginal spirit presence could not usurp the assertion of his rational and intuitive mind, that non-Aborigines shared their right of occupancy through a common humanity:

But there are other places. This was yours,
 Old people: humbly we seek to share it....
 There, by that tree,

Naked under the sun in simple joy
 We found our love; there on the sand our children
 Laughed, licking sea-salt from naked skin.
 We cannot ask forgiveness—but this site
 Bears our name now, our mark, as well as yours (Brissenden,
 1990:15).

A third way of attempting to belong is to invoke a shared common fate. A recently published oral history about 20th century experiences of the Australian poor is entitled *Reading Labels on Jam Tins* and subtitled “Living Through Difficult Times” (Banbury, 1993). Two of the seven chapters are on Aboriginal topics. It would be a very poor oral history which omitted Aboriginal experience altogether, but their occupying nearly a third of the book serves a second function of stressing features of Australian life which Aborigines and non-Aborigines share. Not all Aborigines wish to be so encapsulated.

A second, more explicit act of inclusion-through-shared-experience utilises the loss of country first lost to local Aborigines through invasion, then to local non-Aborigines through development. The Burragorang Valley, south of Sydney, was flooded in the 1950s to create a reservoir. In the Wollondilly Heritage Centre nearby, the loss of land by the Aborigines is conflated with the loss of land by the non-Aboriginal farmers. A sign in the historical display reads:

Beneath the deep waters of the Warragamba Dam there lies a drowned valley. For over 130 years this valley was the home of farmers and miners, shopkeepers and schools, guesthouses and churches, timber cutters and bullockies.

This poignant opening statement is, rather surprisingly, then expanded to include the Aboriginal Gundangoora people who once had loved, and lost, the same valley:

For thousands of years before them, it was the home of the Gundangoora people; their ancestors and their sacred places; their legends and their dreamtime.

These assertions, of course, have been written by non-Aborigines. They lack the essential imprimatur of the contemporary Gundangoora that the farmers shared an *equally* valid and moral occupancy of the valley. It might well be withheld.

A few Australians have managed to achieve an imprimatur. Among them are the linguists, historians and anthropologists who have spent many years living in the one Aboriginal community, who may after several years of residence be rewarded with the right to belong in that country.

Almost all of them start in a state of total ignorance:

I never thought anything about Aboriginal people living then. [As a child] we used to go on these trips, you know you'd jump in the back of the bottle-green FJ, up came the books and we'd read. Country was something you drove over when you go somewhere. It's been a big process from seeing blank space, to seeing the country outside that window as vibrant, networks of people, knowledge of how to use it, looking after it, symbolic stuff, spiritual stuff, past events: so when you look out the window now you sort of go "Wow..." I never had that before getting to know Aboriginal people.

The physical and metaphysical journey begins with a necessary change in the mind set of a young PhD student:

The general idea that things can be explained scientifically and rationally, that's certainly under challenge; and even if you cling to something like that, I think you're still forced to realise that there are a lot of competing explanations for things that are happening. I abandoned the idea that there is some single truth, a single right way for all human beings to think about the world. Its the sort of thing that forces on you. And that can make you a little bit directionless for a while.¹²

Soon the young field-worker will be introduced to Aboriginal land:

It started where I was living. The first place I was taught really was crocodile billabong. I was taken over there and they explained to me that it's the sun dreaming and there's a hole, they say, under the water, that connects it to the river, and they said, "don't swim in here 'cause the water 'll suck you down"....And the next place I was taught was the men's area. Some of the men took me for a really long walk one afternoon and on the way back they explained to me, "what we've done is walk round the outside of the men's area and everywhere we've walked today is okay for you to walk. Then, it's everything you see on the road. And testing me, so the second time we went they'd be saying, "What's that? What's the name of that hill?"

All field workers know that Aboriginal land is invested with multiple meanings. Now knowledge becomes intuition:

[Aborigines] have such a powerful feeling for—you might call it the life-force of these things, or the spirits of certain rocks or trees—whatever term you use for it, it's just their conviction, and their vision is just so strong and so powerful, that you can't remain sceptical about it. You can say, "Oh now in our own scientific terms there's nothing there"—but that's totally irrele-

vant to what's going on. And some of it rubs off. You find yourself being less overtly sceptical, less anglocentric; even if you don't believe it or sense it yourself, you start to sense it as a possible belief, as a possible world. You start to get a glimpse of the way they might feel it and in some way you feel it yourself.

But the corollary of spiritual inclusion within an Aboriginal country is, as it is for Aboriginal owners themselves, exclusion outside. The scholars return at last to family, employment or study, and in these non-Aboriginal domains the sense of not belonging is often more, not less acute: they now truly understand Aboriginal senses of belonging. Intimations of detachment may be that disjunction of heart and mind which Dark confronted:

Maybe [my attachment] could be as deep as a Murri [Queensland Aboriginal] who lived around Brisbane, I like to think it could be. But it's not as legitimate. I'm just worried by the legitimacy of it. Intellectually maybe, but in my gut feeling I have always felt like I belonged. I didn't feel as though I belonged in Europe. I tried to: but I didn't. I have a really strong emotional pull to South-Eastern Queensland, really strong. The more I go and the older I get the more I go back I want to stay.... That's just something inside me.

Does it hurt if Murriss call you one of the invaders?

Yeah. Oh it does. You have to really think about it, because you're used to thinking of yourself as on-side, and suddenly you're pushed over there. Oh, what am I really?

"What am I really?" Some field-workers believe they must forever remain the perpetual symbolic invader:

I don't think I could ever argue that I had a right to be there. All I can say is that there are physical aspects of the Australian landscape with which I have an enormous affinity, and which probably have done a great deal to shape my cultural identity. But I can't claim that I have the right to be there.... I can't claim to have sprung from this country, from the physical landscape. It's a wonderful feeling to think that, but I don't think that's a legitimate feeling. You can certainly feel and learn to understand and develop affinities with it.... I am the outsider. I would like to consider myself a good friend, and a trusted friend; but I think that that is as much as I can ever hope and expect.

Others speculate that their spiritual acceptance in Aboriginal land confers, in some sense, a right of general occupation, but the price of occupation is the inadequacy of understanding of their own country which they love:

Do you feel the lack of an Aboriginal guide when travelling in unfamiliar parts of Australia?

Oh always. I've got perhaps 10 per cent of the feel; so it does give you more of a respect, but it's an unknown book that you don't know how to read. Intellectually and emotionally I know this area quite well, and I know how rich the stories are of that place. The extraordinary thing to think is that all of Australia was like that. And that's an extraordinary indictment on western people in Australia that maybe 40 per cent of Australia's left with stories intact. That's something I drive and move with, you know there should be teams of people out there assisting Aboriginal people so they can come back to country they can remember and to record it. Its a national disgrace that it's not being done. It gives you an emptiness driving to Sydney down that freeway—even the European history has been obliterated. No one now knows what the full level of those meanings were.

Will, then, non-Aborigines ever be able to sink their legitimate roots into this Aboriginal land?

We have to work through, somehow, all of that stuff that happened between now and when White people first came. A healing process. There's got to be so much anger expressed. Aboriginal people have to unload all that stuff,...there's so much self-destruction going on. Looking inwards. Violence and fighting between families. If all of [the past] leaves a trace, somewhere, in the air, in people's minds, and some sort of spirit thing as well...

So the violence and wickedness may not only have a physical dimension: they may have their tensions unresolved within the earth? Can that be worked through?

I don't know

I have reviewed four ways in which non-Aborigines have tried to overcome what we might call the skeleton at the feast of national belonging. Perversely, it seems that the more one knows about Aboriginal senses of belonging (not to mention the history of dispossession) the more one is aware of the inadequacy of truly belonging to a colonised country without a general Indigenous imprimatur.

Why has "belonging" become important to non-Aborigines in the 1980s? During this period there appeared dozens of analyses, descriptions and oral histories of massacres of Aborigines, dreadful conditions on mission stations, travesties of justice, bureaucratic brutality and the arbitrary removal of children, which together made hundreds of thousands of thinking Australians realise that they did indeed have a case to answer.¹³

The uncovering of these well concealed events coincided with, or was related to, a deepening post-colonial anxiety that European civilisation, which was responsible for most of the colonisation of the previous millennium, was deficient in many of the qualities which the colonised peoples had possessed in abundance. Post-colonial anxiety, I thought, was the driving force of the film *Dances With Wolves*.

Probably more non-Aboriginal Australians have felt that they belonged here than historians have acknowledged. Recent arrivals planted English trees, weeded out Australian native plants, saluted the British flag and called England home. So, it was alleged, did their children. The million non-English speaking migrants who came to Australia after the Second World War called this intense English attachment into question, but we are now a little less certain that English immigrants were as uncomfortable here before the migrants as has generally been supposed. The question is at present unresolved; my own belief is that we have been deceived by the public record, and that non-Aborigines formed much earlier and deeper attachments to individual localities in Australia than we believed. The point here is that, partly mirroring similar anxieties in many other post-colonial nations, it became much more important during the 1980s for non-Aborigines to articulate their sense of belonging. Within a few years of the avalanche of the new histories, a new genre of "this is my place" literature appeared. Artists and literary figures were interviewed about their favourite spots; generally a photographer took them out on location and sited them poetically amongst their favourite rocks and trees.¹⁴

Meanwhile non-famous Australians were articulating the attachments which, probably, they had always held firm. Here are two examples

It's me. Footscray [a Melbourne working class suburb] is me. I know I'm happier here than I've been for years....I felt as if I'd come home....I liked it very much, I do, and I won't be leaving here.¹⁵

The mountains are almost like our church—that's where we go to fulfil ourselves so that we can carry out our lives.¹⁶

These passionate affirmations carried no apparent consciousness of Aboriginal attachments to the *same* land. Where now, as is becoming more common, non-Aborigines are mindful of Aboriginal moral claims, they are at a loss to know how to confront them:

I don't know how much Aborigines loved the land here, all I know is that they couldn't have loved it more than me.¹⁷

What then lies beyond the post-colonial nexus? Very few non-Aborigines have lived sufficiently intimately with Aborigines to enjoy the privilege of a teacher's confirmation of their own place in the land, and no guide may

speak for the whole country. Nor is the generalised reassurance of Aboriginal elder statespeople sufficient while the non-Indigenous are paralysed by guilt. Charles Perkins, the first Aboriginal head of a Commonwealth Department of State, believed that:

My expectation of a good Australia is when White people would be proud to speak an Aboriginal language, when they realise that Aboriginal culture and all that goes with it, philosophy, art, language, morality, kinship, is all part of their heritage. And that's the most unbelievable thing of all, that it's all there waiting for us all. White people can inherit 40,000 or 60,000 years of culture, and all they have to do is reach out and ask for it.¹⁸

Why would, indeed, Aborigines affirm to non-Aborigines that they have the right to form attachments, and love the country according to their own culture? This returns us to the question of a symbolic bargain. Non-Aboriginal Australians have made a significant offer of reconciliation through the Native Title legislation and the Social Justice Package promised for the Aborigines of Southern Australia.¹⁹ All credit to the federal government for what it has done. The mistake it has made, I believe, is not to ask simultaneously: *what can you offer us non-Indigenous people in return?*

Aborigines doubtless will consider the government's efforts insufficient to enter into a bargain which would eventually symbolically confer upon all Australians the moral right to belong here. We have a lot further to go. The affirmation to Aborigines that this Australian land is still Aboriginal land—your land as well as ours—may be a starting point. At some future point the Aborigines may concede in return:

This Aboriginal land is your land as well as ours.

It is an imprimatur which the non-Indigenous have to earn.

Notes

1. The author is an Australian Research Council Fellow. He is Chair of the journal *Aboriginal History*.
2. The Aboriginal Treaty Committee was founded in 1978 to work towards a freely negotiated Treaty between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.
3. H.C. Coombs, interviewed by P. Read, 1983, in the series *The Aboriginal Treaty Proposal* produced for Public Radio; originals in Tape Archives, Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.
4. The *Mabo* decision was a landmark in Australia. Briefly the High Court ruled in June 1992 that Indigenous rights continued until or unless they

were specifically removed by law, or effectively removed in fact. *Mabo* recognized some Indigenous law and law-giving ability, and demolished the old concept of *terra nullius*.

5. The *Native Title Act*, passed in 1993, gives effect to *Mabo*, especially in the north, south and west. It is supported by a Social Justice Package intended to assist those who lost Native title.
6. For example, Frank Brennan noted in *Sharing the Country* that "There is no question of Aboriginal sovereignty separate from the sovereignty of the Commonwealth of Australia" (1991:164).
7. An English botanist who travelled with Captain Cook.
8. An Aboriginal painter.
9. Archie Roach, "Native Born" from the album *Charcoal Lane*.
10. The *Northern Territory Act* does not refer to "Native Title." Among several differences between the two Land Rights Acts is that of original ownership. Under the Northern Territory legislation, Aboriginal attachment has to be demonstrated; under Native Title legislation, Native Title is assumed to exist until extinguished.
11. Dark, 1945:177. I am grateful to Marivic Wyndham for showing me this passage.
12. This and the following extracts are drawn from discussions by the author with Dr. Richard Baker, Dr. Ian Green, Dr. Anna Haebich, Dr. Debbie Rose and Dr. Lyndall Ryan.
13. See, for example, Rowley (1967); Reynolds (1982); Rosser (1984); Edwards and Read (1989); Rose (1991).
14. Several anthologies of lifesites have recently appeared, such as Macdonald (1990); even *Panorama*, Ansett Airline's flight magazine, has occasional articles entitled "My Favourite Place." These anthologies coincided with more contemplative works such as Conrad (1990) and Pybus (1991).
15. Mrs. McIndoe, interview 20 September 1984, transcript conducted and held by Melbourne's Living Museum of the West.
16. Leona Lovell, quoted in Hodges, *A Sense of Place* (1993). See this article in Gordon and Hodges (1993) for a number of similar statements about the feelings of non-Indigenous cattlemen and women.
17. Granville Crawford, interview by the author, February 1994.
18. Quoted in Read, 1990:315.
19. The Social Justice package is intended for those living on lands where Native Title has been extinguished, and includes a Land Fund to buy freehold land.

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