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# CIRCLES *in the* SAND: *an* INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORK *of* HISTORICAL PRACTICE

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### ■ Abstract

This paper seeks to identify and explore the differences of Indigenous approaches to historical practice. Why is history so important to Indigenous Australia? History is of crucial importance across the full spectrum of Indigenous understanding and knowledge. History belongs to all cultures and they have differing means of recording and recalling it. In essence, the paper explores the undercurrents of Australian history and the absence for so long of an Aboriginal place in that history, and the process over the past 40 years in correcting that imbalance. During the 1960s and 1970s the Aboriginal place in Australian history for so long erased, overlooked or ignored was suddenly a topic worthy of wider attention and importance. But despite all that has been published since, we have not realistically even touched the surface of what is buried within both the archives and oral memory. And quite clearly what has been recovered remains largely embedded within a white viewpoint of the past.

### ■ Introduction

The title of this paper may be somewhat misleading; it is not my intention to put forth my own system and beliefs as the Gregory's road map of Aboriginal historical practice. We are a diverse people and with all aspects of culture – differing approaches and methods must be respected. However, I do intend to explore a number of themes embedded within this paper, namely the importance placed on the restoration and reconnection of Aboriginal people with the largely fragmented, lost and erased sections of our history. I have prioritised my work to concentrate on aspects and issues of Aboriginal history that are either unknown or not recognised. History can be an inspirational tool in providing our future generations with a proud past with our own heroes and heroines. It can also play a significant role in informing wider white society of both the tragedy and celebration of our historical experience.

There is a general misconception that history belongs to Western and European thought and that its interpretation and preservation is bound by the rigid guidelines they see fit to impose upon it. History from the Western perspective is largely confined to the Rankean model of enquiry and practice. This practice was based on diligent archival research cementing documentary evidence as fact; consequently everything else is regarded as not real history. But history belongs to all cultures and they have differing means of recording and recalling it. Native American historians have importantly identified the Western model of history as like a tree with many branches. In comparison, Indigenous interpretations of history are likened to a forest of many differing and varied trees (Nabokov, 2002, p. vii).

At base level history is a study of the past and the heart, core and soul of history are the stories. Yet academic historians have lost the art, and history is being strangled by analysis and theoretical interpretation. This is crucial to Indigenous history where the story is, was and will always remain the most important issue. Nerida Blair recently commented on this importance:

History is story. It is told by people. It is story written by people. It is story filtered through different lenses and perceptions. It is accompanied by different baggage. History is about finding the voices from many different perspectives and identifying the layers (2003, p. 3).

Indigenous history, Blair (2003, p. 3) emphasises, “is rich in story, memories and community”.

Today, Aboriginal history is regarded as containing the longest memory known to humankind and it was maintained through song, dance, story and art. The Aboriginal vision of the past is multidimensional – where past, present and future merge and fuse. In the contemporary setting, Aboriginal historians continue to incorporate this multidimensional practice including not just song, dance, story and artwork, but film, photography, and poetry as legitimate mediums in revealing greater understandings of our past.

### ■ Forgetting

Why is history so important to Aboriginal people? I have no hesitation in stating that history is crucial across the full spectrum of Indigenous understanding, knowledge and well-being. It is the central foundation at the very core of our cultural identity. It delivers our sense of belonging and place in the world. In the academic arena, the desire for historical objectivity has long ceased to be attainable, but for Aboriginal people, truth certainly from an Aboriginal vantage point is like a beacon of desirability; it was our truths that were denied. The aftermath of 1788 witnessed a long period where historical erasure and fracture clearly targeted Aboriginal people. We were driven and encouraged into a state of forgetting and detachment from our past. The methods used by government to ensure the genuine absence of an Aboriginal place in the landscape were dispossession, segregation, assimilation and cultural/historical deprivation. Combined, these policies proved extremely destructive and today, Aboriginal Australians still carry the psychological scars together with sad and scattered memories of terrible experiences in their personal pasts.

This process witnessed decades where the recognised mainstream version of Australian history had deliberately left out Aboriginal Australians, except as token or marginal players. It needs to be kept in mind that our perceptions are based and shaped from an early age on what we see, what we hear, what we are taught and what we are told. In that context, generations of Australians including Aboriginal people have been fed histories which were based on fabrication and distortion of the truth. This fabricated history glorified the imperial conquerors, administrators, explorers, discoverers and settlers: Aboriginal people were largely ignored. Henry Reynolds pointed out that an Aboriginal presence in the history of the continent had “virtually disappeared from the history books during the first two thirds of the twentieth century” (1999, p. 111).

We are at a great disadvantage if we do not have access to our history. This is exemplified in the contemporary setting with issues over land rights, Native Title, stolen generations, trust monies etc. Without the facts we can

be duped, conned and tricked. As an example during the early decades of the twentieth century Aboriginal people were prospering on independent farm lands where they had re-established themselves, built homes and planted successful crops. Despite decades of labour and success, they were cast off this land, some 13,000 acres in total, and much of it on prime north coast land with no recompense. It was handed over to white settlers and returned World War I soldiers. The full implication of this event was recognised decades later, but that recognition was in the passing of legislation to protect the government from legal challenge over the wrongs of the past:

Once the Aboriginal farmers had been evicted, the reserve over the land was revoked and it was alienated permanently. Ironically, it became clear in the 1970s that ALL of these revocations were in fact illegal, a problem solved by the (NSW) Wran (Labor) Government by passing legislation concurrently with its 1983 Land Rights Act which retrospectively validated the second dispossession (Goodall, 1988, p. 6).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Aboriginal place in Australian history for so long overlooked or ignored was suddenly a topic worthy of wider attention and importance. But despite all that has been published since, we have not realistically even touched the surface of what is buried within both the archives and oral memory. I am not just referring to national or state archives here but the little local historical societies and museums which are treasure troves of information. Quite clearly much of what has been recovered remains buried within a white viewpoint of the past. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that “imperialism and colonialism brought complete disorder to colonised peoples, disconnecting them from their histories, their landscapes, their languages, their social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world” (Smith, 1999, p. 28), and that “history is about power. In fact history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in a position in which they continue to dominate others” (Smith, 1999, p. 34). Over the course of the past decade, the power of history has certainly been recognised by both the major political parties within this country where it has been utilised to maximum effect by both Paul Keating and John Howard.

African Americans have recognised the importance of history and memory for eight decades. During the 1920s Marcus Garvey forcefully declared:

“The time has come,” he declared, “for the Blackman to forget and cast behind him his hero worship and adoration for other races, and to start out immediately to create and emulate heroes

of his own. We must canonize our own saints, create our own martyrs, and elevate to positions of fame and honor Black men and women who have made their distinct contributions to our racial history" (in Martin, 1976, p. 83).

Similarly Malcom X articulated:

I don't think any of you will deny the fact that it is impossible to understand the present or prepare for the future unless we have some knowledge of the past. And the thing that has kept most of us – that is, the Afro-Americans – almost crippled in this society has been our complete lack of knowledge concerning the past (Malcom X, 1990, pp. 11-12).

The severance of people from historical knowledge has had a severe and detrimental impact in Australia as well. Marcia Langton insightfully recognised that when "the cues, the repetitions, the language, the distinctly Aboriginal evocations of our experience are removed from the recitals of our people; the truth is lost to us" (Langton, 1981).

Gary Foley in his own inimitable style has strongly argued the level of encouraged forgetting:

I mean I see all these fucking Aboriginal people on television and newspapers talking about the importance of people knowing their issues and yet most of these people know fuck all about the issues themselves. They know their involvement, and their experience and they think that that's history ... It's outrageous. And I'm saying that as one who teaches, and I teach this stuff all the time. And ironically as a result of that, I reckon there's more young white middle class Melbourne university kids walking around Melbourne who know more about Aboriginal issues than half the fucking Koori community down here. It's ironic (cited in Muir, 2006, p. 153).

### ■ Personal experiences

Correcting these deficiencies has never held greater importance. The majority of Aboriginal historians, and not just those confined to the academy, are at the outset on their own personal journeys of discovery and fulfilment. That journey can comprise any and sometimes all, of the following: *family, extended families, kinship, and community ties and obligations*. Therefore, in most cases our first attempts at history or historical research hold deep personal meaning and significance. I certainly did not come from an educated background; I left school at the age of 15 and confess that I wasted my time at school. I spent a lot of time day-dreaming and looking out the windows. Fortunately I

loved to read, especially history, and in some sense my education through reading and travel continued for the entirety of my adult life. On reflection, I today find myself in this university environment solely because at the age of 40, I approached an Aboriginal centre at a regional university for some advice on my own family history research. I was looking to gain direction regarding research on my grandfather and his involvement with early Aboriginal political resistance. More than a decade later I am still fuelled by a burning desire to explore every conceivable avenue for information to ensure that the story of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) attains its rightful place in the history of this continent.

Importantly, I have never written or confined myself to the academic arena or audience. Personally, and from an Indigenous standpoint, I find the academic arena far too confining and with little hope of achieving any significant change. Academic writing has its uses but can do nothing to improve conditions for Aboriginal Australians. Research reports, books and articles examining aspects of Aboriginal culture, history and experience in the thousands have been written within the academic environment during the past 20 years alone, and the majority of these outputs sit on shelves gathering dust. My research centres on those areas of missing, erased or obscure history and much of what I have revealed was not known to the wider populace, both black and white. I have combined diligent archival research with a strong focus on oral historical memory. However, my journey has delivered results that have caused a domino effect with knowledge and memory restored to so many other families and communities.

History research is exciting, exhaustive and constantly evolving. There can be remarkable highs and lows in the process. At times, discoveries seem endless, followed by long periods where it may be many months where you simply uncover nothing. As an example of the sharp shifts in direction and the importance of oral memory, I will relate one incident of my research which centred on an old family photograph. Back in 1996, I was awarded a fellowship and made a visiting history fellow with the history department at an Australian university. As a result of that fellowship, I spent six months conducting intensive archival and oral research in relation to the Aboriginal political movement of the 1920s era. The old family photograph in the past had been attributed as being the AAPA in conference in Sydney in 1925. This notion was challenged by an uncle out west. He was adamant that it was in fact a much earlier organisation and that the tall blackman wearing a beige suit in the back of the photo was famous African American boxing champion Jack Johnson. I was incredulous! I studied the photograph with a magnifying glass and as I collected images of Jack Johnson from various published sources concluded that he was in fact correct, but what did it

all mean? My uncle added that the meeting depicted and involving my grandfather had something to do with grandfather setting up a black shipping line! I was staggered to say the least and quite frankly a little perplexed. As the knots would unravel he was again right in the gist of things but there was some confusion over the combining of Jack Johnson and what would come later with grandfather's connections to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association – who did in fact establish a black Star Line shipping company. Eventually, I was able to venture back to the archives and I was rewarded immensely for weeks spent going through newspapers of 1907/1908 finding the farewell to Jack Johnson reference that was in fact the photograph. The photograph depicting a large gathering of black men who were known as the Coloured Progressive Association, an organisation mainly consisting of transitional international black mariners, also showed, along with Jack Johnson, my grandfather and Peter Felix, a West Indian boxer who fought Johnson during his visit. That initial interview with an old uncle was responsible for opening up references to a host of sources linking the early Aboriginal political movement and Black American influence and inspiration. Of course, in the end it has led to the uncovering of conclusive links between the AAPA in Australia and Garvey's massive international organisation in the United States during the 1920s.

### ■ Conclusion

Australia must understand and come to terms with its past. In recent times, the whole thing has degenerated into an exercise of political and intellectual point scoring with little thought or compassion to the Aboriginal suffering in the past and the scars that horrifically impact and remain deeply embedded in the Aboriginal psyche today. The present Australian historical climate is a clearly divided and politically charged environment of hostility. The great importance of revealing and recognising our erased histories is self-evident in any argument. Our histories can play a central role in exposing the hypocrisy and lack of historical credibility carried by those opposing their telling, and more importantly, provides a platform of inspiration for our future generations. To our people and those that support us, "stay strong, the struggle goes on".

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### ■ About the author

Professor John Maynard's traditional roots lie with the Worimi people of Port Stephens. His diverse areas of research include the Aboriginal political movements in the 1920s, the history of Aboriginal jockeys titled *Aboriginal stars of the turf*, Aboriginal involvement in the steel industry, inter-relationships between Aboriginal men and white women, Aboriginal health, Aboriginal soccer players, and traditional Aboriginal life and language. He has held several important fellowships including the Stanner Fellow (ANU), NSW Premier's Indigenous History Fellow, ARC Indigenous Research Cadetship and ARC Postdoctoral Fellowship. He has worked with and within many Aboriginal communities – urban, rural and remote.