Restoring a Future to a Past

Philip Morrissey

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Restoring a Future to a Past

Abstract
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Restoring a Future to a Past

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Henri Corbin, 'The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism'

The Bicentenary is often viewed as the commemoration of an invasion and the destruction of Aboriginal Australia, defined by Eric Willmot as the place of 'the beginning, the place of becoming human'.

The executive officer of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, Robert Weatherall, in the most recent issue of Social Alternatives put forward the following popular analogy:

It is impossible to ask Aboriginal people to participate in Expo '88 and Bicentennial celebrations, because it would be like asking the Jewish community to celebrate the holocaust that occurred against them. It would also be impossible to ask the Japanese people to celebrate Hiroshima. You wouldn't get the support.

Notwithstanding this it has proved possible to ask the Aboriginal community to become involved in the Bicentenary - to the extent that in response to the Australian Bicentennial Authority's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program several hundred communities and individuals indicated they wished to be involved.

Another approach to the Bicentenary which has wide appeal has been outlined by Galarrvuy Yunupingu:

If you want us to join you in a celebration for all Australians, 1988 should be the year when you come to us with a real recognition of who we are and a positive vision of our place in this Australia. It should be the year when we sit down together around the negotiating table and work out a treaty to rewrite the constitution, to set the right course as a truly just society for Australia's next 200 years and beyond.

Many of the Aborigines and non-Aborigines who marched in the contra Bicentenary event on 26 January 1988 would have agreed with Yunupingu's
sentiments. The march itself was considerably broader in its cultural implications than a straightforward boycott. One Aboriginal leader’s speech, following the march, would not have been out of place coming from an advocate of the ‘Living Together’ theme of the Bicentenary and the striking news photographs of the march and its individual participants point to a victory of the spirit over historical circumstance.

In England on the day of the march, Burnum Burnum, an Aboriginal ecologist and actor, laid claim to that country and among other things, solemnly undertook not to souvenir, pickle or preserve English heads or make a quarry of England and agreed to teach the natives Pitjantjaatjara and how to have a spiritual relationship with the earth. Burnum’s irony in part exemplifies his refusal to be imprisoned by history or to accept a moral or a political dimension of the Bicentenary as being the only one. Speaking of his own Bicentennial grant to prepare a traveller’s guide to Aboriginal Australia (to be published by Angus & Robertson later this year) Burnum has sometimes said that he is celebrating 250 Bicentenaries.

European settlement in Australia meant the end of a world and its effect was as devastating as the Mongol conquest of Islamic civilisations during the 12th Century. The psychological and physical brutality which attended the expansion of European interests in Australia into the 20th Century is being documented in increasing detail and thoroughness in contemporary histories. These facts in the modern world assume an importance which overrides all other values.

A parallel is often drawn between the Aboriginal and American Indian experiences. In the 1930s, Black Elk, an American Indian elder who had lived through the wars which culminated in the massacre at Wounded Knee, in summary of his life and the experiences of the Indian people, said:

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

Similar traditions in Australia not only depict the events which accompanied the subjugation of a nation but also in Eliade’s terms introduce ‘history’ into Aboriginal life. The process happens not without struggle and Eliade writes:
Hence it is probable that the desire felt by the man of traditional societies to refuse history, and to confine himself to an indefinite repetition of archetypes, testifies to this thirst for the real and his terror of ‘losing’ himself by letting himself be overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence.

Side by side with dreaming traditions, oral histories are preserved, detailing the experiences of European contact. As well as being a record of the experience of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal contact the histories introduce Western historicism into even the most traditional communities and increasingly Aboriginal Australians begin to define themselves by the experience of 200 years.

Out of this dialectic develop concepts such as Aboriginal sovereignty and land rights and their attempted satisfaction within the ambit of Western law and affirmed by Government aid programs which legislate to improve material conditions and which are often perceived as de facto compensation.

There has been a marginal attempt to classify the Bicentennial Aboriginal Program as compensation, but it has not been a consideration for those Aborigines implacably opposed to the Bicentenary. For them the question of adequate compensation is irrelevant compared to the moral issue of a bicentenary and with regard to compensation, the question of land rights is the issue. The Bicentennial Aboriginal Program is usually accepted for what it is – a creative forum for the Aboriginal community in the Bicentenary year. In comparison to the health, welfare, economic development and employment creation programs administered by the major bodies in Aboriginal affairs, the Bicentennial Aboriginal Program is comparatively modest – with a total budget of $7.46 million.

- Guidelines for funding applications were purposefully as broad as possible. To be eligible for consideration projects had to:
  - Commemorate Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander life, people, events or customs.
  - Celebrate some aspect of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander life or achievement.
  - Preserve or develop Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander life, custom or society.
  - Create a better understanding of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence and experience in Australia.
Promote greater social harmony and understanding in Australia.

Tom Thompson, the Australian Bicentennial Authority's publisher, has pointed out that we are witnessing a major cultural event in the movement of an oral tradition to a written form. This is born out in the number of literary/historical projects in the Bicentennial National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program. As well as names like Sally Morgan, hitherto unknown authors such as Ruby Langford are being published under the program. If there is one quality which distinguishes the Aboriginal writers being published, it is their authenticity, the borrowed polemics of sixties' radicalism are replaced by a search for an individual and genuine Aboriginal voice.

Traditional communities are involved in this process through organisations such as the Western Desert Puntukunuparna and Broome based Magabala Books. The Western Desert Puntukunuparna on behalf of the Western Desert communities is undertaking a massive Aboriginal oral history of the non-Aboriginal Canning Stock Route, the last venture in non-Aboriginal Australia's quixotic 'exploration' of Australia. A recent progress report on the oral history describes the different approach to history taken by Aboriginal society. The Canning Stock Route was seen as a quite marginal episode in the history of the desert. Gradually the significant themes became clearer: country, movement, autonomy and the joys of the hunter-gatherer economy.

There was, of course, much discussion about first contacts with the whitefellas and their tucker but it seemed incidental to the main themes, it took the form of anecdotes about a different world which was not readily perceived as a threat to their own. The stories about country confirmed their unshakeable confidence in the integrity of their culture...

The Bicentennial National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program has been open-ended enough to reflect changes taking place in Aboriginal culture and its symbiotic relationship with non-Aboriginal culture.

Following the success of Mayi, Magabala Books has published three other titles in 1988, Wandering Girl, Story of Crow and Jalygurr. Wandering Girl's promotional poster evokes the power of the book by quoting a few lines, 'Soon as I opened the door all the chatter and laughter stopped. You could hear a pin drop as all eyes were on me... “Tracey dear, is this your little dark servant?” I just stood there smiling. I thought it was wonderful that at last
people were taking notice of me... I turned to the lady who did all the talking and said, "My name is Glenyse". She was quite startled; she said, "Oh dear, I didn't think you had a name."

Magabala Books will also be publishing the Bunuba's retelling of the story of the Aboriginal resistance leader in the Kimberleys, Jundamurra, who fought only 90 years ago. Reading the first proofs of this historical novel it is hard not to relive the beauty and clarity of the Kimberley landscape or to sympathise with the metaphysic which inspired the Bunuba. Oral traditions from the Bunuba people provide completely new perspectives on Jundamurra's motives and personality – a person who converted from something of a renegade to a committed law man during the period of war with settlers.

The establishment of Keeping Places, the preferred Aboriginal term for museum/cultural centres which carry out the dual function of preserving and renewing Aboriginal culture, is also expressive of a development in the outward form of Aboriginal culture. Historical information which once would have been individual becomes recorded and stored in accessible forms for the total community. Dreaming traditions and the heritage of the law collected and memorised over a lifetime are also recorded on video or audio cassette for selected community use.

Granted cultural evolution happens regardless of specific programs, but having a program sensitive to the needs of the community accelerates and provides the material supports which encourage this process. Further examples of this translation of value and culture include Australia's first Aboriginal television station which is being established in Alice Springs with a transmission range of approximately one-third of the Australian land mass and a computerised dictionary of Aboriginal languages being established for use by all Australians. At Yuelamu, in a variation of traditional practice, a secret/sacred ground painting previously done on open ground to be eventually dispersed by the elements, will be constructed by elders in a Keeping Place for permanent ceremonial use.

The interplay between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture is most clearly seen in a Jimmy Pike work to be included in the Bicentennial Aboriginal Program's art poster series. Entitled Kartiya Boat, the artist engages in an active interrogation of European culture with his representation of a clipper ship approaching the Australian coast. The work
could almost be the definitive Bicentennial picture, having been done by a major artist, an Aborigine, and dealing with the crucial event of the Bicentenary. In the act of creating, Jimmy Pike transforms the 'chaos' of non-Aboriginal Australia into a 'cosmos' understandable by all Australians, but quietly from a sovereign Aboriginal position.

Stephen Muecke has pointed out the serpentine relationship between Jimmy Pike's work and non-Aboriginal Australia via shared cultural needs and high fashion:

Jimmy Pike's traditional symbolism, a statement of belongingness to the country, answers a need on the part of the metropolis for an ethical direction which is placed outside of the infinite proliferation of information, media technologies and representations. The fact that his work is of the highest artistic order, and that it has found a vehicle in design and fashion is a tribute to his traditional practice of 'moving culture along' and to the sensitive and creative entrepreneurial work of Desert Designs (the artist's agent).

Perhaps a researcher examining the official Bicentennial Aboriginal program in 50 years' time will recognise the first signs of an Aboriginal renaissance, popular and cultural and unconditioned by political didactics or popularisations of traditional Aboriginal spirituality. They might also acknowledge that the first steps in the Aboriginal repossession of Australia began as a cultural movement. Further to this they might find the hermeneutic Jimmy Pike engages in when he paints a sailing ship, a more useful and integrated attempt at understanding the Bicentenary than some of the crude dissections of contemporary critics.

The process might be summed up in the words of Corbin:

To integrate a world, to make it one's own, also implies that one has emerged from it in order to make it enter into oneself.
Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal

Photo Gerry Turcotte