

## *The Stench of the Past: Revisionism in Pacific Islands and Australian History*

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*for Greg Dening*

The dead need history,” Greg Dening wrote (1996, 96). “I feel one of the obligations of the public element of my intellectual life is to give voice to the dead, especially of the victims” (1996, 95). It is inevitable that such history is not for the dead alone. “The living need history, too. Not to be made to feel guilty for a past they are not responsible for or cannot change. The living need a history disturbing enough to change the present” (Dening 1996, 96). In this article I am grappling with some of the problems involved in writing histories for the dead and of and for the living, and in writing against histories that evidence a lack of respect for the dead. I am asking how a history informed by poststructuralist concerns can be consistent with postcolonial ethics of writing about colonialism. I explore these issues by discussing two cases of revisionism, one in Pacific Islands history and the other in Australian history.

### HERMANN HIERY AND HISTORY MADE BY A GREAT DANE

At the Ninth Pacific History Association Conference in Christchurch in 1992, the German historian Hermann Hiery caused a stir with his assertion that the so-called Madang Revolt of 1904 was only a figment of European imagination. As background to Hiery’s critique, subsequently published in the journal *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (1993), I briefly summarize what by 1992 had become firmly entrenched as orthodoxy. This orthodoxy originated with the contemporary colonial accounts and was confirmed by missionaries and anthropologists who worked in the area (Hannemann nd, 26–28; Lawrence 1964, 69). In 1978, Peter

*The Contemporary Pacific*, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 1998, 31–64  
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Hempenstall published the most elaborate version of this orthodox view with his *Pacific Islanders under German Rule*. His account was endorsed by Stewart Firth in *New Guinea under the Germans* five years later. The most detailed account of the Madang Revolt to date, Schütte's *Der Ursprung der Messer und Beile* (1995, 189–220) modifies Hempenstall's findings without contradicting them.

By the turn of the century, all land in the immediate vicinity of Madang had been alienated by the German Neuguinea-Kompagnie, which had administered German New Guinea between 1885 and 1889, and again from 1892 to 1899.<sup>1</sup> The alienation of land extended to the islands off the coast of Madang and affected people from Bilibili in the south to Siar in the north. Those living in the vicinity of Madang were coerced into working for the Germans. Eventually, a coalition of local villagers, led by Siar and Bilibili people, plotted to kill the Europeans in Friedrich-Wilhelms-hafen (as Madang was then called), and on nearby plantations. Word about these plans first leaked to Rhenish missionaries working in the area in January 1904.

On 26 July 1904, eighty armed men infiltrated the European settlement, but their plan was betrayed by the German doctor's *hausboi*. The native police dispersed the rebels and shot one of them dead. District Officer Stuckhardt “proceeded cautiously with an investigation” (Hempenstall 1978, 182) that revealed the extent of the plot. In accordance with standard German practice, he made arrangements to exile those prominently implicated in the plot. But the European settlers at Madang demanded measures sterner than those adopted by Stuckhardt. In August 1904, Deputy Governor Knake arrived from Kokopo, declared martial law in Madang, and on 17 August had six of the ringleaders executed by firing squad. By leaving their island, the Bilibili people initially escaped the retribution ordered by Knake. They were forced into submission about a year later, after police pursuing them on the Rai Coast had killed at least seven Islanders.<sup>2</sup>

Hiery opened his paper by referring to several cases of anticolonial resistance in Tahiti, Fiji, and New Caledonia. Pacific historians, he found, should have established why there was supposedly no comparable resistance to German colonial rule, instead of seeking out “less substantial evidence of potential Melanesian resistance” (Hiery 1993, 165<sup>3</sup>). In his article, Hiery tried to debunk the alleged myth of anticolonial resistance in German New Guinea by showing that the Madang Revolt, one of the

showcases of Pacific historians investigating anticolonial resistance in German New Guinea, never happened.

Hiery argued that Hempenstall and Firth uncritically took on board the testimonies of the German colonizers, as well as the testimonies collected by the Rhenish missionaries from those allegedly involved in the aborted uprising. The whites in Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen tended to be paranoid about “native rebellion” and only too ready to believe rumors (like the one spread or generated by the doctor’s *hausboi*). It is possible, Hiery suggested, that word about the murder of ten Catholic Mission staff in New Britain reached Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen shortly after Deputy Governor Knake’s arrival and less than a month after the alleged revolt. The ensuing hysteria among the European residents of the settlement made Knake decide to declare martial law.

The Rhenish missionaries, Hiery claimed, were interested in portraying their flock as rebellious because they were frustrated in their efforts to proselytize and believed they could demonstrate their loyalty to the colonial administration “at the expense of the indigenous population” (167). They supposedly had good reason to do so because “in the same year the Rhenish Mission had been made responsible for the outbreak of the Herero uprising in South-West Africa” (167). When questioning their flock, the missionaries were told what they wanted to hear, because of a “curious feature of Melanesian behaviour . . . if a European wishes to have something confirmed by a native inhabitant, it will be confirmed on every occasion” (169).

Hiery also tried to discredit other evidence used by Hempenstall. Oral histories collected in 1966 by Roderic Lacey were supposedly unreliable because they were translated twice (Hiery 1993, 170).<sup>4</sup> Evidence that surfaced in a land dispute was brushed aside because “[i]t is as good as worthless to adduce testimony from land disputes as historical evidence, when every participant is seeking to bring about the best outcome for himself” (171). Both the testimonies collected in 1966 and those collected during the land dispute were deemed unreliable for another reason: in both cases the Australian colonial administration supposedly “had an interest in perpetuating the chimera of the so-called rebellion to discredit the Germans” (171), and Papua New Guinean informants would have been only too willing to provide the Australians with evidence for their anti-German prejudices (170). An article about the Madang Revolt, by the Papua New Guinean historian Wesley Kigasung (1977), which was

based on at least three interviews with local villagers and published one year before Hempenstall's book, was disregarded by Hiery because Kigasung was ostensibly concerned with the causes of the revolt rather than the actual events in July 1904.

After judging the evidence used by Hempenstall to be worthless, Hiery advanced his own explanation for what happened at Friedrich-Wilhelmshafen on 26 July 1904. Many Siar, Bilibili, and Kranket people came to the town to trade, as it was the day after the departure of the steamer. When some of them approached District Officer Stuckhardt (who had his back turned to them and could thus never confirm that they were about to attack him), Stuckhardt's dog, a Great Dane, threatened them. They ran away. Their flight was misinterpreted by the native police, who gave chase and killed one Islander. Hiery expounded confidently, "Typically the Melanesians have no respect for their own dogs, which generally are from smaller breeds. . . . By contrast, most Melanesians enter into a state of fearful panic when confronted with European guard dogs" (171).

However, if the supposed attackers really had wanted to kill the district officer, they would not have let the Great Dane foil their plans. Melanesians are afraid of European dogs, but, Hiery reasoned, they

have proven again and again to be prudent, fierce and courageous fighters; had there really been a determined plan to attack the Europeans, the dog, no matter how big it was, would have been accounted for in one way or another. And to achieve the prime target which was set, Melanesian fighters would have rather died in battle with the dog than given up their aim. (172)

Hiery's listeners at the Pacific history conference were disturbed by his essentialist assumptions about Pacific Islanders. Those with some knowledge of Papua New Guinean history were also disquieted by his assertion that "nothing faintly resembling [the] level of resistance" in Tahiti, New Caledonia, or Fiji occurred in German New Guinea (165). Furthermore, most historians who have worked in the Pacific Islands (rather than merely writing about Islanders) would have had little sympathy for Hiery's disparaging attitude toward oral histories.

Hempenstall and Firth carried out the research for their books, and developed their respective approaches to writing Pacific Islands history, during the last years of Australian colonial rule in Papua New Guinea.<sup>5</sup> They supported the aspirations of the Papua New Guinean elite. In the early 1970s, interpretations that ascribed agency to Papua New Guineans

and indicted the colonizers had much currency among Australians writing about Papua New Guinean history. Such interpretations still have a following, as Schütte's account has demonstrated: "There can be no doubt that here a people tried to escape from being strangled. 1904 is a political act" (1995, 198).

In 1992, the questions of whether or not, or to what extent, Papua New Guineans resisted British, German, Australian, or Japanese colonial rule were not pressing issues in Papua New Guinea. Hiery's attack on Hempenstall and Firth obviously had little to do with Papua New Guinean concerns about national or local histories. On other occasions, Hiery had been at pains to rehabilitate German colonial rule in the Pacific (see Hiery 1995). He seemed to imply that the alleged myth of the Madang Revolt was nurtured by the Australian administration as well as by Australian historians, because Papua New Guinean resistance was an indicator of the injustices of German rule in New Guinea.<sup>6</sup>

As Hiery's intervention was obviously removed from any Papua New Guinean context, one has to look elsewhere for an equivalent to the granting of independence to Papua New Guinea in 1975, a context that is crucial to an appreciation of Hempenstall's and Firth's approach. I believe the context for Hiery's history can be found in Europe rather than in the South Pacific. Like other German historians writing against the backdrop of the reunification of Germany in 1990, Hiery seemed intent on rejecting the idea that Germany could be blamed for its past.

#### ROD MORAN AND THE *WEST AUSTRALIAN*'S SENSE OF PROPORTION

In late 1994, I received a copy of "an open letter to historians and academics concerning the integrity of Aboriginal history,"<sup>7</sup> and several attached copies of newspaper articles by one Rod Moran that had been published in the *West Australian*. The letter asked its recipients to challenge and refute claims Moran had made in the *West Australian* and to assist the Kimberley Land Council and the Oombulgurri Association, the senders of the letter, in mounting a campaign against Moran's allegations.

The Moran debate in the *West Australian* began with a three-page article on 8 October 1994 in the paper's weekend supplement, in which Moran claimed that the so-called Forrest River massacres of 1926 never happened. The first detailed published account of the events between May

and July 1926 in the vicinity of the Forrest River Anglican Mission was the report produced by the Wood Royal Commission (Wood 1928), which was established in 1927 to investigate claims that a large number of Aboriginal people had been killed by a party of Europeans and Aboriginal trackers, led by police constables St Jack and Regan. The commissioner found that the police party had murdered at least eleven Aboriginal prisoners while ostensibly searching for the murderer or murderers of a European, Frederick Hay, one of the lessees of Nulla Nulla Station. The commissioner's findings were subsequently, Moran claimed in his article, "written into both the folk and academic history of this State" (1994a).<sup>8</sup>

Moran's argument focused on the testimony of the superintendent of the Forrest River Mission, the Anglican missionary Reverend Ernest Gribble. The accounts of massacres originated with Gribble, Moran claimed. Gribble, however, was supposedly an unreliable witness, whose testimony should not have been taken seriously. In order to prove the second part of his argument, Moran quoted extensively from a confidential report the anthropologist A P Elkin wrote about Gribble and the Forrest River Mission shortly after the killings.

Moran's piece was not the only article about Aborigines in the Kimberleys that appeared in the *West Australian* on 8 October. The same issue featured an article titled "Hunger Led to Cannibalism," and accompanied by a photo of an elderly Aboriginal man. The article claimed that Aborigines who were forced to abandon Kunmunya Mission during World War II and walk over four hundred kilometers to Kalumburu were involved in fights with other Aborigines as they crossed tribal boundaries and ate about twenty of those killed in these fights. The claims were made by an Unanbal elder, Basil Djanghara. In the article, the church lent its authority to Djanghara's claims: "Kalumburu priest Father Anscar McPhee said cannibalism occurred early this century. One elder who died this year was believed to have eaten about 12 people in his lifetime, Father McPhee said" (Brown 1994a).

Moran's article challenged what had been considered established knowledge and came at a time when then Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating, had called for an acknowledgment of acts of violence by the European invaders against Australia's indigenous inhabitants. Therefore Moran's claims were certain to provoke a public reaction. One might have expected this reaction to reverberate in the pages of the *West Australian*, but its readers, or the person editing the Letters to the Editor pages,

were seemingly preoccupied with more pressing issues. On 11 October, three days after the publication of Moran's article, E B Courtney from Mosman Park asked, "Have we no national pride? Hundreds of boats turned out to farewell Endeavour but very few of them wore a flag. What is wrong with our sailing community? Where else in the world could this happen?"

Also on 11 October, the reporter who had written the piece on cannibalism, Karen Brown, contributed a feature article titled "Community Lives in Squalor." She suggested that the "residents of the isolated Oombulgurri Aboriginal community in the Kimberley endure the worst living and environmental health conditions of any Aborigines in WA" (1994b). Her article was illustrated with two photographs depicting the squalor at Oombulgurri.

The next day there was still no reaction to Moran's claims. But H Harvey from Koongamia also commented on the recent *Endeavour* spectacle:

While not ignoring nor denigrating the worthwhile voyages of discovery by the Portuguese and the Dutch, it surely must be acknowledged that Capt. Cook and HM Bark Endeavour fully deserve the celebratory recognition that is given them for their place in Australia's history. I don't expect Australian Aborigines to be celebrating these events enthusiastically, but I was pleasantly surprised to see some in the crowd at the launching of the Endeavour. Perhaps they were interested in learning something of our history and cultural celebrations just as we should be interested in learning something of theirs. (*West Australian*, 12 Oct 1994)

On 15 October, finally, the paper published four letters critical of Moran's claims. Three of the letters suggested that Moran's denial of the massacres was akin to suggestions that the Holocaust did not happen. All four writers seemed intimately familiar with the orthodox history of the events of 1926. One of them, the historian Neville Green, relied mostly on evidence publicized during the Wood Royal Commission to refute Moran's statements. Green also drew on a different source of authority: "In 1967, I was principal of the government school at the Forrest River Mission. I can assure Rod Moran that even 41 years after the event the Aboriginal population of the mission did not share his view that the massacres were myths. They still don't" (1994).

Green's verification was corroborated by a second letter writer, Frank

Chulung of Kununurra, who said both his parents had lived at Forrest River and had told him about the massacres. One of his relatives had been a police tracker at the time and eighteen years later had apologized to his mother for being party to the murders. An uncle of his, now in his nineties, “tells the story of how he discovered the body of a key witness—an Aboriginal who was forced to participate in the outrage, shortly after the massacre.” Readers of the *West Australian* who were unfamiliar with the Kimberleys learned something else from this letter. In an aside Chulung mentioned that the Forrest River Mission was now called Oombulgurri (1994).

On 17 October, the *West Australian*’s editorial dealt with Oombulgurri and reminded readers of Karen Brown’s article published six days earlier. “All decent people must be appalled at the desperate circumstances of the Oombulgurri community disclosed by this newspaper last week,” the editorial stated. The writer also made what could be read as an oblique reference to the time when Oombulgurri was called Forrest River Mission by alluding to “the sometimes tragic and often sad history of Oombulgurri” (*West Australian*, 17 Oct 1994, 12). These sentiments were contradicted, however, by a letter published opposite the editorial. Its author, Mrs L E Harper of Karrinyup, insinuated that the squalor at Oombulgurri was largely self-inflicted, and observed that she had personally coped with a greater lack of resources than that experienced by the Oombulgurri community: “There are always flies in the bush, but leaving rubbish lying about (as in the photograph accompanying a recent report) doesn’t help. I grew up on a farm in the 1930s—most people lived in wheatbag and bush timber houses. We had poor transport, no water supply other than rain-water tanks, no telephone and no electricity” (*West Australian*, 17 Oct 1994, 13).

On 19 October, Rod Moran was given the opportunity to reply to his critics. He addressed Neville Green’s objections by rehearsing his earlier argument that the fault lay entirely with Ernest Gribble. “With regard to the contribution from Frank Chulung, it can only be said, with the greatest of respect, that it is sincere but unreliable testimony” (Moran 1994b). Moran justified this conclusion by referring to an interview with a relative of Chulung, presumably his mother, in which she had claimed that a thousand people had been killed at a site where, according to Commissioner Wood, four people had died.

On 20 and 22 October, two letters were published that congratulated



Moran on his “revealing research” (G W J Pearce of Karratha on 20 October) and “fine piece of investigative journalism” (J Prunty from Waikiki [Western Australia] on 22 October). But Moran’s reply to Green and others was once again challenged, this time by Harry Venville of Geraldton, who had lived at Forrest River Mission in 1958 and 1959.<sup>9</sup> He attacked Moran’s central argument, Gribble’s lack of credibility, and spoke with the authority of somebody who had “studied the royal commission report and . . . talked to Lumbia,” the murderer of Hay. Venville was moved to write to the newspaper because he “could not let an author with such a distorted view have the last say” (*West Australian*, 24 Oct 1994). This, however, was exactly what happened, at least on the pages of the *West Australian*. Moran was granted the privilege of replying to Venville in the same issue. He added no new argument and again focused on Gribble’s alleged lack of credibility. Moran prefaced his reply by saying, “I am interested in the historical truth, to the extent it can be established at this remove in time, and not about (*sic*) any belief concerning such a serious matter as mass murder. I have tried scrupulously to rely on primary sources” (1994c). This last word seems to have closed the debate about the massacres—for the time being and as far as the *West Australian* was concerned.

Dear *West Australian*

I praise thee for thy unfailing sense of proportion,  
for the pitiless light thou throwest on the bourgeois mind,  
for the culture and humanity; but above all  
because thou art the only paper available.

(Stow 1963)

These are lines from a poem published in 1963 by a young Australian novelist and poet, a former resident of Forrest River Mission (and former cadet patrol officer in Papua New Guinea), to whom I shall return later.

A few months after Moran’s claims in the *West Australian*, Neville Green published a book about the Forrest River massacres. Although it is inconceivable that this publication was a reaction to Moran’s claims, Green was able to include a reference to Moran in his introduction. Green was concerned to explain the events of 1926:

These events are now so distant that many would question that they even occurred. There is, however, no doubt at all in the minds of the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley. Sit down at any camp fire, turn the conversation to

the old days, and stories of the killing times are brought out. I have never questioned the fact that the violence was a part of the Australian frontier. What concerns me is why it happened. (Green 1995, 17–18)

However, Green never explicitly said why the massacres happened. Instead he recounted the prehistory of the events of 1926, that is, the history of colonial violence and relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in the Kimberleys up to 1926. He attempted to show “that the Forrest River massacres were not aberrations, but almost the end of a trail of destruction that came to the Kimberley with the pearlers, the pastoralists, the prospectors and the police” (Green 1995, 18–19). More than half of Green’s book consists of a recounting of events that happened before 1926.

#### ALL HISTORY IS DISCURSIVE

The contexts of Hiery’s and Moran’s arguments are obviously very different. What their texts have in common is that they are both attempts at revising anticolonial orthodoxy. Hiery took issue with historians who detailed (and applauded) instances of anticolonial resistance in Melanesia. His piece was an attempt to refute the view that New Guineans suffered greatly at the hands of the German colonizers and consequently resisted German colonial rule. Moran attempted to refute the idea that Australian Aborigines were massacred in the East Kimberleys in 1926. He took issue with writers who emphasized the violence of the colonizers and the suffering of the colonized in Australia. In both cases, anticolonial orthodoxy had established that colonial rule was grossly unjust—in the first case by saying that it sparked anticolonial resistance, and in the second by saying that it culminated in murder. Not necessarily wanting to reendorse the thrust of the orthodoxies under attack, I am concerned with finding an epistemological vantage point from which to critique the revisionist texts.

On its own, divorced from the context in which the question is posed of whether or not the ancestors of today’s Papua New Guineans resisted German colonial rule, the content of that question is banal. Why is the question of anticolonial resistance more important, than, say, the question of whether or not, or to what extent, the ancestors of today’s Papua New Guineans adopted the use of toilet paper? The worthiness of the former, and the unworthiness of the latter question, are due to the relevance of answers to these questions. Answers to the first question have

been, to some extent, relevant for Papua New Guinean identity formation, and, more so, for the identity of anti- or postcolonial historians. There is no question prior to somebody's interest in an answer.

In the case of Moran, the answer to the question of whether or not or to what extent Australian Aborigines were killed by the European invaders has important ramifications. Although the question as such does not demand an answer, it appears that those answering it—Moran, Green, and others—all pretend that the question itself is important. Maybe that is why they study the way Gribble collected his evidence, rather than how the issue features in the context of today's relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in Western Australia and elsewhere.

I have always been at least as much interested in histories as in pasts. However, as historians produce history regardless of whether or not they pretend to be primarily occupied with history, the question of whether or not one is interested in one rather than the other does not pose true alternatives. There is no past without a history. The alternative to Green and Moran is not to write *about* history—because essentially that is what they are doing as well, however much they would like to deny or disguise it. The alternative is to acknowledge this interest in history, and to acknowledge that the past is only ever discursively constructed as history, and does not exist out there ready to be found and *reconstructed*. Such acknowledgments allow historians to pay attention to the context of histories—in this case, to the intersections between discourses about the *Endeavour*, Aboriginal cannibalism, sanitary conditions at Oombulgurri, and the Forrest River massacres. They allow them to bring the past into the present by drawing connections between the events of the 1920s and the editorial practices of the *West Australian* in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> In other words, they allow them to historicize histories, historicize them ethnographically, as it were.

## GHOSTS CRYING IN THE NIGHT

Moran's attack suggests that the Forrest River massacres have featured prominently in Australian histories. This is by no means the case.<sup>11</sup> The first academic histories to mention the massacres in some detail are Charles Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* in 1970 (1972, 200–202) and Peter Biskup's *Not Slaves Not Citizens* in 1973 (84–85).<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the events were briefly mentioned in a history of Western Australia

published in 1981 (Bolton 1981, 141), and they were the subject of an article by Brian Fitzgerald (1984).

From Moran's diatribe against Gribble one could also get the impression that the orthodox history of the Forrest River massacres depends mostly on an account penned by the Anglican missionary. However, apart from a letter detailing his investigations,<sup>13</sup> Gribble's published accounts of the massacres were both insignificant and inconsequential.<sup>14</sup> The historiography of the Forrest River massacres relies largely on two sources: the report of the Wood Royal Commission (Wood 1928), and Daniel Evans's account in Randolph Stow's novel, *To the Islands* (Stow 1958, 50–55).

Stow, from whose poem about the *West Australian* I quoted earlier, worked as a storeman at Forrest River Mission in early 1957, and began writing the novel, which is set at the mission, later that same year. In the novel, Justin, an Aboriginal "man of forty with the quiet dignity belonging to that age among his race" (Stow 1958, 48), tells the story of the massacres to two of the novel's non-Aboriginal protagonists. Although Stow said in an introductory note to the first edition that his was "not, by intention, a realistic novel; no white character, therefore, and no major incident in the plot, is drawn from life," he acknowledged in the same note that "[f]or details of mythology and language I am deeply indebted to my Aboriginal friend Daniel Evans, as to many of his people" (1958, ix). The account of the massacres is referenced in a footnote—the only one in the novel: "This narrative was taken down verbatim from an account by Daniel Evans of a notorious massacre. Here the names of people concerned and most place names have been altered" (Stow 1958, 54n1).<sup>15</sup> Three years after the novel was published to much acclaim, the Australian magazine, the *Bulletin*, printed the text of the Evans narrative—this time with the proper names of people and places (Stow 1961).<sup>16</sup>

Today, one of the most widely read histories of the Forrest River massacres is probably a chapter in Bruce Elder's *Blood on the Wattle*. Elder works primarily as a music journalist but has written on a wide variety of subjects. *Blood on the Wattle* provides gruesome accounts of some of the most notorious incidents of colonial violence in Australia. The book was written for a general audience. Elder rarely cited his sources. The book is not annotated, and its bibliography is obviously incomplete. *Blood on the Wattle* was highly recommended in a kit prepared and distributed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) for the International Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993. Its sentiments

were brought to the attention of a wider audience when Paul Keating borrowed freely from Elder's conclusion in his Redfern Park speech in December 1992.

Elder's history of the Forrester River massacres is based in large parts on Evans's account. Elder added dramatic detail, however. To give one example: In *To the Islands*, Justin/Evans, characterized as a "careful storyteller" by Stow (1958, 50) describes how Hay, the white pastoralist at Nulla Nulla, flogged Lumbia, the Aboriginal man who then killed him.

Mr. George [Hay] . . . got off his horse and flogged him with a stockwhip. I think he gave him twenty cuts or thirty, he beat him for a long time. He broke his spears up, he broke the bottle spear, and the shovel spear, he broke the bamboo, broke it halfway up the stick. And the old bloke looked at him, he was bleeding with the flogging he had, across his eyes, you know. And he turned around and got the shovel spear, he looked at him, and he threw it at him, you know how you throw a javelin, and Mr. George got the spear in his lung. (Stow 1958, 51)

Evans's account was obviously the only source of Elder's description of the same incident:

[Hay] dismounted, carefully and slowly unfurled his stockwhip, and proceeded to flog the old man who covered himself defensively and tried to escape. Hay must have landed twenty or thirty lashes. He had cut Lumbia on the back and the arms and the legs and a thick welt, with blood seeping from it, ran across Lumbia's face just below the eyes. Then Hay, driving home his "lesson," grabbed Lumbia's spears and started breaking them. As Hay remounted, Lumbia reached for his shovel spear and with unerring accuracy hurled it at his attacker. It went through Hay's chest and punctured his lung. (Elder 1988, 135)

The differences are significant. In the first account, Lumbia is an impressive figure. He keeps looking at Hay, in spite of being flogged. The account elicits respect for Lumbia from the listener (that is, Stow), and subsequently from the reader. Hay is doomed once he gets off his horse. The flogging, and the breaking of Lumbia's spears, have comparatively little effect on Lumbia. They do not change the seemingly inevitable course of events.

In the second account, Hay is portrayed as cold, calculating, and brutal. His brutality has a profound impact on Lumbia, who tries to protect himself and to escape. Readers are invited to inspect Lumbia's wounds. As if

he were staging a historical tableau, Elder describes Lumbia after the flogging has been completed. The action then continues with Hay's breaking of Lumbia's spears. As a last resort Lumbia spears Hay. However, Lumbia's agency is reduced to the moment when he reaches for his spear. The "unerring accuracy" appears as a natural trait, not as an individual skill. The spear finds its target—by the time it punctures Hay's lung, Lumbia's intervention in the course of history has become a one-off incident in the past.

This very brief extract about the death of Hay is indicative of the approach Elder took in *Blood on the Wattle*. Aborigines are generally portrayed as hapless victims. The reader is invited to pity the victim (rather than respect the historical agent, as in the first text). Elder's textual strategies push the past invoked by Evans further back. Elder's depictions of the European perpetrators are likewise unambiguous. They are brutal, their actions are wrong, their actions must be condemned.<sup>17</sup>

Elder began and ended his account of the Forrest River massacres with the words Justin chose to conclude his narrative about the massacres in *To the Islands*:

Nowadays, now, at Onmalmeri,<sup>18</sup> you can hear the ghosts crying in the night, chains, babies crying, troopers' horse, chains jingling. I didn't believe it, but I went there, mustering cattle for droving to the meatworks, I heard it, too. We were camping at Onmalmeri Station couple of weeks. We were there sleeping, still. It was all silence. You could hear woman rocking her baby to sleep, "Wawai! Wawai! Wawai!" like this, rocking the baby to sleep. (Elder 1988, 140; compare Stow 1958, 55)

In Randolph Stow's novel, there is no escaping the crying of the ghosts. The novel seems to suggest—if it suggests solutions at all—that one needs to be able to bear listening to the ghosts.<sup>19</sup> Elder's book is an attempt to silence the ghosts (or to devise a means whereby one is protected from them, which amounts to the same). He invites his readers to join him in condemning Hay, Regan, St Jack, and others, to acknowledge that their deeds (the deeds of "our," his readers', forebears) were morally reprehensible. Hay's "descendants" can escape the ghosts only if they dissociate themselves from Hay, that is, banish him into the past.

By obscuring the difference between the past and its representation, Elder also banishes history into a realm that is removed from the present. "History cannot be rewritten. Time cannot be recaptured. All the will-

power on earth cannot un-invent the nuclear bomb. All the goodwill and shame cannot return Australia to the idyllic paradise of 1787. The naivety which is implicit in sentiments like those expressed by the rock group Midnight Oil when they sing ‘Let’s give it back’ is a nonsense” (Elder 1988, 199).

Elder summarized this history in his conclusion (which became the blueprint for part of Prime Minister Paul Keating’s Redfern Park speech):

The intimate love of the land, the subtle ecological balance which recognised that there was a time to pick bush fruits and kill animals and a time to refrain from picking and killing, the careful response to the seasons, the powerful acknowledgment of the land’s spirituality, the careful cycle of ritual and initiation which was at the centre of every life, the clear definitions of tribal land, these were all part of an elaborate and beautiful part of every Aborigine’s “reason to exist.”

We, the invaders, took all that away. We destroyed it. We took the land as if it was our own. We destroyed the native fruit-bearing trees to create pastures for cattle and sheep. We killed native wildlife so that it would not compete for the pastures. We replaced ecology with aggressive nineteenth-century exploitative capitalism. We built roads over sacred sites. We denied the land its spirituality. We killed off Aborigines with guns and poison and disease. (Elder 1988, 200)<sup>20</sup>

Both the romanticized Aboriginal way of life, and “our” crimes are located in the past, as if there were no continuity between pre-1788 and present-day Aboriginal culture, and as if the sins Elder recounted no longer happened.

“Our” sinful deeds are irrevocable, Elder suggested. “We” cannot reverse the course of history (here, of course, Keating disagreed: after all, he wanted to give some of the land back). Elder’s (and Keating’s) solution to the potential burden of an irrevocable past is one known to any practicing Catholic: sins require confession, and confession allows for absolution. The past is guilty, and needs to be guilty for the present generation to be able not to hear the ghosts crying in the night. According to such logic, those in the present who deny the guilt of the past forgo the right to be absolved. “The blood of tens of thousands of Aborigines killed since 1788, and the sense of despair and hopelessness which informs so much modern-day Aboriginal society, is a moral responsibility all white Australians share. Our wealth and lifestyle is a direct consequence of Aboriginal dispossession. We should bow our heads in shame” (Elder 1988, 200).

Unlike a good Catholic, Elder did not wait for the priest's absolution, *te absolvo*. He did not address an independent arbiter. Nor did he ask for forgiveness. He essentially resorted to a self-absolving *nos absolvemus*.

Randolph Stow, or rather the nurse, Helen, in *To the Islands*, knew better: "I don't believe in heaven and hell, but I believe in sin, and sins that aren't wiped out on the earth stay on the earth forever echoing and echoing among the people left behind. We're trying to wipe out the sin of the white men who massacred these people's relations, but we can't ever quite do it, because we're not the same white men" (Stow 1958, 90).

Helen makes two important points. She rejects the possibility that one might divorce the past from the present to the extent that it is effectively buried. And she points out that one is tempted to try doing just that. An engagement with Elder and Keating (and Moran and Green, for that matter) needs to take into account the strength of the urge to start afresh in the present. This urge is a response to the voices of the ghosts. Three different responses are involved here: the emotional and moral response to a violence whose presence is still felt in the present, a more instinctive reaction to this response, and a strategy that results from this instinctive reaction. One ought to be careful then not to confuse the moral response to colonial violence with a moralizing strategy that distances the past and effects closure.

Elder and Keating not only conjured a temporal distance between the colonial past and the present. They also substituted a morality tied to an individual's responsibility in the present to a prescriptive ethics relevant to the past, as if "the moral 'I' [were] just a singular form of the ethical 'us'" (Bauman 1993, 47). Responding to colonial violence then becomes a matter of abiding by ethical norms defined for "us"—and serving some higher purpose: that of the Australian nation, for example.

The first person plural extinguishes the moral responsibility of the first person singular and at the same time sets up a relationship involving a "they." If "we" confess to murders in the past, then "they" will have to reciprocate. Under the guise of an affective moral response, Keating proposed a deal. It's called reconciliation.

By rejecting Elder's (and Keating's) prescriptive and self-interested moralization of the past, I am seemingly striking a chord with many historians. In the next section I look at an approach that seems diametrically opposed to Elder's.



## THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PAST

In Aboriginal history, approaches that favor views of indigenous Australians as *either* passive victims *or* quasi-autonomous agents have recently come under critical scrutiny. The critics have acknowledged the contexts that informed what they perceived as one-sided interpretations and have argued for a balanced view that takes note of the complexities of the past.

Richard Broome is one such critic. He opened his 1994 article, "Aboriginal Victims and Voyagers: Confronting Frontier Myths," with an acknowledgment of history's rootedness in the present: "Past times are constructed times and thus contestable. . . . The questions we ask and the histories we write are shaped by who we are, what we know and what issues we face in the present, as well as by events of the past and what we can know of them from fragmentary records" (1994, 70).

Broome looked critically at a particular set of questions asked and histories written: those concerning the interactions between Aborigines and Europeans on Victoria's colonial frontier.

History reflects political views implicitly or explicitly, especially on the matter of the black-white frontier. Whereas it was formerly "politically correct" in the manner of the winners' view of history to see the frontier as a peaceful sphere of glorious white progress, it is now "politically correct" in the way of viewing history from "the bottom up" to see it as a field of killing. I prefer to see it as both—and more! I prefer to uncover the real complexity I take to be inherent in the encounters between two cultures. (Broome 1994, 71)

Broome took issue with the Museum of Victoria's construction of the past in its exhibition, *Koorie*, and in the accompanying catalogue. For Broome, the (Aboriginal)<sup>21</sup> curators' historical interpretation, which emphasized the violence of invasion, is a prime example of political correctness. But if history inevitably reflects political views and is rooted in the present, how did Broome exempt not only the history he himself writes, but also the histories he cited in support of his thesis (most notably, Marie Fels's *Good Men and True* [1988]), from a scrutiny that could reveal their authors' political agenda?

One answer to this question is suggested by the last quotation: if two opposing interpretations of the past are informed by opposing political views, then an interpretation that combines the two—"and more!"—is

presumably able to cancel out these political stances and allow its author to take a neutral stance. Such a neutral perspective, which supposedly no longer reflects political views, would seem to allow Broome to gain better access to the past and to uncover its *real* complexity. It presumably enabled him to let his history be shaped only by events of the past and what he could know of them, rather than by issues in the present.<sup>22</sup> However, the real complexity of the past is not so much something Broome discovered in his historical investigation as something he assumed was there in the first place, inherent in encounters between two cultures.

The second answer has to do with the tone as much as with the content of Broome's history (as opposed to the politically correct history produced by the Museum of Victoria):

Australia is founded on killing and there will be no reconciliation without a clear recognition of that fact. But this should be an honest and sober recognition—and of both white and black violence—not an exaggerated, emotive recognition which claims all fighting and all Aboriginal fatalities as massacres. Such an approach creates either white guilt or disbelief[,] not understanding or justice. Guilt is inappropriate, for we did not inhabit the past. Any guilt we might feel should be reserved for present injustices to Aboriginal people. Such an exaggerated and emotive approach also diminishes Aboriginal people who lived in the past by seeing them as victims and little else. (Broome 1994, 74)

Having pretended in the first part of his article that he was writing history from a disinterested vantage point, here Broome admitted to his own political agenda by advocating a reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Reconciliation, Broome suggested, not only necessitates reconciling opposing viewpoints—"and more!"—but an honest and sober, as opposed to an emotive and exaggerated, approach. Such reconciliation is presumably facilitated by the historian who is able to close the chapter titled "colonialism" and at the same time offer a model of complex interdependencies between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians for a postcolonial future that has already begun.

In his discussion of the Museum of Victoria's interpretation of the past, Broome concentrated on contradicting the claims made in *Koorie* by citing historical evidence neglected by the curators. It is obvious, however, that he took issue with a particular interpretation of the past as much as with the moral judgments made in the catalogue. A sober history is presumably one that does not pass judgment on the past.

In Broome's terms, Elder's *Blood on the Wattle* is an exaggerated and emotive history. Yet whereas Elder and Broome seem to have written from opposite vantage points, they were interested in the same outcome: to separate the past from the present—indeed to banish the events they represent in their histories into a past that is divorced from the present. Elder closed the chapter “colonial past” by making a confession that was so comprehensive that it promised to prevent any further revelations of “our” sins in the future. Broome closed the same chapter by writing an exhaustive history that incorporated all possible viewpoints. Both Elder and Broome insisted on having the last say. Stow's novel also highlights the complexity of the past—but his past is located in the present.<sup>23</sup>

There is something very comforting about the idea that histories represent a reality that exists independently of its representations and can be known. When writing this paper, I was sorely tempted to abandon my resolve not to engage with Moran's and Hiery's claims by adding my own assessment of the available historical evidence. For one, it seemed easy to contradict them by abiding by their rules. It seemed foolhardy to forgo the opportunity to operate on Moran's and Hiery's terrain. When advancing a critique that is incompatible with their approaches, I know that they will be able to ignore what I am saying. I am addressing the “wider implications,” as demanded by the writers of the open letter, but am I providing useful arguments that could be employed in a campaign against Moran's insinuations?

### EXORCISING THE CHIMERA OF RELATIVISM

I am arguing for a contextualization and historicization of histories. At the same time, I am aiming for a deconstruction of histories, not least by constantly exposing them as discursive constructions of the past, thus denying the validity of the equation, history = past (or, more modestly, history = reconstruction of the past, or history = approximation of the past), on which much of their authority rests.

Does such deconstructionism automatically imply a nihilistic relativism, as is claimed by many of those who insist on a past outside history, and on a history that bears a semblance to that past? Consider how such a claim could be made in the first place: If all history were discursive, and the past were unknowable and only existed as long as it was constructed as history, then, so the argument goes, anything could pass for the past.

Supposedly, one history must be as true as any other because there no longer would be a stable past out there that could act as a check on the histories purporting to represent it.

I am not denying that approaches to history that may be labeled post-structuralist could go hand-in-hand with such relativism. But one does not necessarily follow from the other. Saying that the past is constituted through its histories does not imply that its discursive constitution excludes a relationship between lived human experience (a past) and its representation. It does not exclude the possibility of establishing a set of criteria according to which one representation of lived human experience is more true than another. (Some historians seem to think that nonacceptance of their supposedly universally valid and nonpolitical criteria amounts to a refusal to define any criteria.)

Truly relativist history would also require that the point at which history is produced is selected randomly. It implies that all questions have the same value. It implies that nothing guides my choice between writing about anticolonial resistance and writing about the adoption of toilet paper. Whether or not this choice is made randomly, and whether or not one is interested in a genealogy of lived human experience rather than merely in representations of such a genealogy, however, is in itself a matter of choice (which may be disguised or not recognized at all by those making the choice, much as other historians disguise or fail to recognize that they write histories of the present when they pretend to deal with the past only).

It would be logical for people who are primarily concerned with history (rather than the past) to pay as much attention to their own histories as to those others write. Or, to put it differently, one could expect their historicizing to include a self-conscious historicization of their historicization of other people's histories.<sup>24</sup> In the terms used by Greg Denning and friends (eg, Douglas 1992), such historicizing needs to be reflexive. Obviously such reflexivity excludes the option of a relativism by default.

A self-conscious approach to the question of which history to write is likely to be guided by an ethics as much as grounded in a politics. Rather than inviting epistemological nihilism, the brand of ethnographic history I am advocating here calls for a sensitivity toward one's own historicizing that is prone to demask a very specific politics and ethics behind any self-declared relativism.

## ORAL HISTORIES

Hempenstall, Firth, Hiery, and other historians of German New Guinea, and Moran, Green, Biskup, Rowley, Fitzgerald, and others who have written about the Forrest River massacres, establish truth claims by sifting historical evidence. To be convincing, their interpretations of various pieces of historical evidence need to form a coherent whole. This procedure distinguishes them from Randolph Stow, whose novel does not claim to represent a *specific* past, and it also distinguishes them from Elder. The coherence of his text is achieved by making his interpretations and narrativizations conform to a dichotomous moral framework. Unlike Moran and the academic historians who assemble different pieces of evidence to build their argument, Elder appeals to his readers to accept the moral framework as such.

In simplistic terms, the pieces of evidence I have mentioned so far, on which the academic historians of colonialism rely, fall into either of two categories.<sup>25</sup> Written testimonies by German missionaries and colonial officials, including those that contain references to narratives or verbatim quotes of New Guinean villagers, belong in the same category as transcripts of the Wood Royal Commission, correspondence between Ernest Gribble and the Chief Protector of Aborigines, and the Forrest River Mission journal. All of these are contemporary colonial sources. That is, Aboriginal or New Guinean testimonies are framed by contemporary colonial contexts, as are testimonies in court proceedings, for example.<sup>26</sup>

The second category is made up of oral New Guinean and Aboriginal testimonies that were recorded long after the event. Moran pretended that the second category does not exist, and Hiery dismissed the oral testimonies of New Guineans as unreliable. The other authors were mostly at pains not to distinguish between the two categories of evidence. Examining the second category more closely, for the Forrest River massacres at least four published oral accounts were recorded between 1957 and 1977: Daniel Evans's narrative in *To the Islands* (and then again in the *Bulletin*); Grant Ngabidj's account, recorded in 1974 and published in 1981 in *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming* (Shaw 1981); and the accounts of Ronald Morgan and Gladys Birch, recorded by Neville Green in 1967 and 1977 respectively, and published in *The Oombulgurri Story* (Green 1988, 80–81).

All four of them were produced in response to the curiosity of a non-Aboriginal person, who then recorded the account, transcribed it (if it was recorded on tape), and edited it. The least-edited account is Grant Ngabidj's in an appendix to *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming* (Shaw 1981, 157–163)—but this transcript also reveals the extent to which Ngabidj's narrative was shaped by Shaw's questions. Nevertheless, taken by themselves, these four accounts are postcolonial histories. The context of their production is very different from the one that framed the Aboriginal testimonies documented in the Wood report. Even though the questions that elicited Ngabidj's narrative, and presumably also those that provoked the accounts by Ronald Morgan and Gladys Birch, were informed by an interest in a historical account that resembled the Wood report, the stories these Aborigines told are histories of a very different quality—they are informed by the grief of the survivors and their descendants. They are informed by social memories that are not shaped by the social frames of a colonial culture that encompassed both the massacres and the subsequent investigation by Commissioner Wood (compare Neumann 1992b, 238–241).

I wish historians writing from so-called postcolonial perspectives were more suspicious of the forms of those histories that have been an integral part of the colonial project.<sup>27</sup> I wish they more often took into account the possibility that the content and form of the historical evidence they use may have been determined by the colonial context. I wish they asked themselves whether or not it was purely coincidental that history emerged as a discipline, with its peculiar set of practices, during the era of European imperialism. I wish they wondered more often about links and convergences between the narrative of Progress, the imperative to colonize, and history's disciplinary practices. Perhaps if they did, they would not so readily treat the histories produced by Aboriginal people like Daniel Evans and Grant Ngabidj in the same way as they treat the colonial documents, by subjecting them to a discipline that has been, I believe, a bed-fellow of colonialism.

I also wish historians were more skeptical about the possibility of a colonialism past the post. Maybe then they would suspect that their abhorrence of colonial practices and their embracing of anticolonial agency could be mirroring those same colonial practices (see Taussig 1992, 51–52).

## THE STENCH OF THE PAST

“We” did not inhabit the past, Richard Broome wrote. Maybe so. But the past has left its traces in the present. Its stench is so penetrating that one could swear it is still there. Letters to the editor reveling in the spectacle of a resurrected *Endeavour* are infused with a past that “we” supposedly do not inhabit. The state of Aboriginal health at Oombulgurri, and the tragic mode in which this state is reported in the *West Australian*, are laden with a time that, according to Bruce Elder, cannot be recaptured.

Not historical evidence from a bygone past, but the past’s ubiquitousness in the present inform my approach to writing about colonial history. Not Neville Green’s laboriously laid out evidence of a horrible but distant past, which can be explained by referring to the horrors of an even more distant past, contradicts Moran’s obscene allegations, but a story also told by Green in his book, of being taken in 1967 by his students at Forrest River Mission to a cross that marked the site where some of the bones of victims of the massacres were buried (Green 1995, 14).<sup>28</sup> The moral dilemma created by Australian settler colonialism cannot be resolved by establishing now whether or not, or how many, Aborigines were killed in 1926.

“Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious,” Walter Benjamin wrote (1968, 257). I would like to say to Neville Green and his well-intentioned defense of the dead of 1926 that dusting off and cataloguing the bones of the dead does not safeguard them from the likes of Rod Moran.

Elder implied that his book was a response to the reprehensible deeds of his ancestors. Present moral anxieties, including those of Elder and Keating, I believe, are also, if not primarily, a response to Aboriginal voices (see Rowse 1993, 1–9). By ignoring these voices, Elder not only failed to listen, he also attempted (unsuccessfully) to silence them.

A nonprescriptive ethics that does not shirk attending to the issues of the present is particularistic rather than universal. Debbie Rose’s exemplary history of Victoria River Downs (1991) is informed by her attentive listening to Hobbles Danayarri. Her ethics, I believe, are also defined and refined in response to Danayarri’s narratives about the past in the present.

The moral decision about which history of the East Kimberleys in 1926 to write, would, in 1957, have depended on listening attentively to Daniel Evans's story. There would be others to listen to today.

The ethics that inform my approach to the Forrest River massacres are necessarily different from those that inform my approach to the Madang Revolt. Who cares whether or not Hermann Hiery suspects some sort of Australian conspiracy to smudge Germany's reputation in New Guinea, and whether or not he thinks there was more anticolonial resistance in French-ruled Tahiti and British-ruled Fiji than in German-ruled New Guinea? His essentializing statements about Melanesians are another matter. And then there are the six men who were executed, and the seven Bilibili people who were subsequently killed by police. *Pata variru*, my Tolai friends would comment. He has no respect. Even the dead will not be safe.

The ethics and politics informing the writing of Pacific Island history are also different from those informing the writing of Aboriginal history because the stench of the past in the present is less noticeable in the Pacific Islands. Because Australia is a settler colony, based on invasion and the large-scale theft of land, the pressures on historians to divorce themselves from the past are greater. In Pacific Island history it seems easier to combine a call for greater complexity with the acknowledgment that the past is by no means dead (see N Thomas 1990, Chappell 1995, and Diaz 1995).

I find Green's application of history's tried and tested disciplinary practices to the events of 1926 questionable for another reason. Which non-Aboriginal academic history could say more than Daniel Evans's history in *To the Islands*? But who is going to stop the outpouring of more and more reappraisals of a supposedly increasingly complex and increasingly remote past, if such reappraisals are rewarded with grants, promotion, and tenure?

Justin scowled. "Brother—"

"Yes?"

"I don't want to talk so much. I too hungry for talking."

"I'm sorry," said Heriot humbly.

"White man always talking and never listening."

"That's true," Heriot admitted. "Very true."

"Whatever you say to white man, he always got something else to say. Always got to be the last one."



“We call it conversation,” Heriot said, and bit his lip as soon as the words were out. (Stow 1958, 160)

In the name of conversation, debate, or reconciliation, non-Aboriginal historians claim the right to have the last say. The right of the conqueror always takes somebody else’s right away.

On this note I would like to close. One last word about the Madang Revolt: Executed by firing squad on 17 August 1904 “for offences against paragraph 8 of the Prussian law on the state of siege of 4 June 1851” were Mas, Majan, Amang, Kenang, Jjai, and Matua (Firth 1983, 82–83). “They were blind-folded, all chained and handcuffed together, with the leader fastened to a house-post and then each shot individually” (Lacey 1973, 22).

One last word about the Forrest River massacres:

At Onmalmeri there was people camping near the river. They shot the old people in the camp and threw them in the water. They got the young people on a chain, they got the men separate, shot the men only. While they was on the chain the policemen told the police boys to make a big bonfire. They threw the bodies in the flame of fire so no one would see what remained of the bodies. They were burned to bits. They took the women on a chain to a separate grave, then the police boys made a big bonfire before the shooting was. When they saw the big flame of fire getting up, then they started shooting the women. (Stow 1958, 52)

\* \* \*

I AM GRATEFUL TO *Martha Macintyre* for comments on a draft of this paper, and to two anonymous reviewers for their encouraging remarks. This article may be read as a sequel to my reflections about Aboriginal histories (Neumann 1992a) and first-contact historiography (Neumann 1994).

## Notes

1 This summary of the orthodox history of the Madang Revolt draws on Kigasung 1977, Hempenstall 1978, and Firth 1983.

2 Figures about those executed in 1904, and those killed later by police, differ in missionary and government sources. The total number of New Guineans who died as a result of German retribution could have been as high as twenty-two.

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical page references in this section are to Hiery 1993.

4 Lacey prefaced his rendition of the oral evidence he compiled as follows: "This narrative of the insurrection by the people of Siar against German missionaries and government from 1904–1912 was collected on 9th May, 1966 at Siar. The narrators were Sabub and Labuk, who spoke in the Graged Language to Mailong, who translated this into Pidgin, which was translated into English by Paul Bloomfield D. O." (Lacey 1973, 20).

5 This is not to deny the complex motives that may have led these historians to favor particular approaches (see Hempenstall 1992, 62–63).

6 Hiery did not, however, rule out that there were injustices: "There was sufficient reason for discontent amongst the people of Siar and Bilibili," he conceded (1993, 166). "Discontent" is, of course, a far cry from Hempenstall's "resentment of the Europeans in Astrolabe Bay [which] reached fever pitch in 1904" (Hempenstall 1978, 180).

7 An open letter to historians and academics concerning the integrity of Aboriginal history from Kimberley Land Council and Oombulgurri Association Inc, 28 October 1994.

8 The massacres are mentioned in academic histories (eg, Biskup 1973), an award-winning novel (Stow 1958), an anecdotal recollection (Wise 1979, 58–59), feature articles in newspapers (eg, Horin 1978, Harris 1984), and, according to Moran, tourist brochures.

9 He had also been a teacher at Forrest River Mission (Green 1988, 120), but this fact is not mentioned in Venville's letter.

10 The practices relevant to the publication of the Moran article (which I alluded to rather than analyzed in the preceding section) are symptomatic of the *West Australian's* notorious approach to Aboriginal issues (see Sercombe 1995). However, ten years before the publication of Moran's claims, the *West Australian* ran a feature article titled "Massacre at Oombulgurri," which combined a potted history of Forrest River Mission / Oombulgurri with the recollections of an elderly Aborigine, Bob Roberts, who recalled the events of 1926, and an account of living conditions at Oombulgurri in 1984 (Harris 1984).

11 F K Crowley, in his 400-page history of Western Australia, first published in 1960, devoted only one sentence to the events of 1926: "Cattle spearing was reported in the Kimberleys from time to time, and on one occasion in 1926 a posse of whites retaliated by slaughtering a number of nomadic full-bloods" (Crowley 1970, 222–223). One could get the impression from this reference that the murder of Aborigines was the logical (and perhaps understandable?) retribution for cattle-spearing. Maybe a more detailed account would have sat uneasily in a chapter titled "Prosperity: 1920–1929"? The massacres, or the Wood Royal Commission, are not mentioned in either the sixth volume of Manning Clarke's

history of Australia (Clarke 1987), Broome's history of Aboriginal Australia (Broome 1982), or the relevant volume of the *Oxford History of Australia* (Macintyre 1986).

12 When Rowley and Biskup wrote their histories in the late 1960s, the idea of juxtaposing histories of massacres in Western Australia with histories of anti-colonial resistance in New Guinea would have seemed less farfetched than it must appear today. Australians teaching at the University of Papua New Guinea and writing about Papua New Guinean *and* Australian history helped to kick-start Aboriginal history as a subdiscipline in Australia.

13 The letter was published in the first collection of documents on Aboriginal history, Sharman Stone's *Aborigines in White Australia* (1974, 149–153).

14 In his published writings, the Reverend Ernest Gribble wrote sparingly about the events of 1926. He was laconic in his first book, *Forty Years with the Aborigines*, where he referred to the killings as “troubles”: “While a police expedition was out after the murderer of a white man, thirty of our bush natives lost their lives” (Gribble 1930, 226), and referred only to the “awful atrocities” investigated by a royal commission in his last book (Gribble 1933, 126). Only in *The Problem of the Australian Aboriginal* did Gribble devote a couple of pages to the massacres (1932, 106–108).

15 In one case, Stow changed a name to involve the main character in *To the Islands*, Heriot, in the events narrated by Evans (in the novel, Heriot replaces Mrs Noble).

16 In the *Bulletin* version, Gribble was referred to as Canon Grubul. This could suggest that Stow only knew of the massacres through Evans. Stow was applauded in the next issue by Roland Robinson, who in his letter referred three times to “our” Aborigines (Robinson 1961); such paternalism is notably absent from Stow's novel.

17 Louise Hercus made similar comparisons between Elder's text and the accounts he used. She was, however, more concerned about Elder's inaccurate rendering of his sources and believed Aboriginal testimonies were “altered for no evident purpose” (Hercus 1988, 225).

18 Onmalmeri is also a fictional name (it is called Umbali in the *Bulletin* article; Stow 1961). Onmalmeri means “the place of white ochre.” Apparently Stow chose this name because of its association with death and ghosts (Hassall 1986, 185n19). Courtesy of Justin's narrative in *To the Islands*, the Forrest River massacres are referred to as Onmalmeri massacres by Biskup (1973, 84–85) and Shaw (1980, 267).

19 *To the Islands* revolves around the issue of reconciliation: “The wish to blot out the past or dismiss it as irremediable (two attitudes towards the Onmalmeri massacre) is wrong; acceptance and a *personal* reconciliation may not solve the problem but they offer what hope there can be” (Hergenhan 1975,

240). Another reviewer (Beston 1981) read the novel as a kind of recipe for attaining reconciliation; such a reading could be interpreted as an indication of the moral anxiety that underlies the way in which an open-ended text like Stow's can be perceived in Australia.

20 On 10 December 1992, Paul Keating (1993) said in Redfern in a speech to launch the Year of the World's Indigenous People: "We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion."

21 Broome did not say explicitly that the curators and the authors of the catalogue were Aborigines, but he mentioned that the exhibition was "Aboriginal-controlled" (Broome 1994, 71).

22 Compare Thorpe 1995. While Thorpe successfully challenged Broome's recourse to a supposedly neutral middle ground, he remained committed to "the practice of a conceptually aware, empirically-based historical practice" (Thorpe 1995, 44); I doubt that conceptual awareness of the kind I am advocating here can be easily reconciled with Thorpe's notion of empiricism.

23 The racist paternalism of the European mission workers would have been too close to the present of 1958 to allow readers to distance themselves from the novel's non-Aboriginal protagonists. In the revised version, Stow deleted some of the racist remarks (1991). Sue Thomas, in a comparison between the two versions, regretted that the revised text had become "a much poorer sociological document" (Thomas 1982, 292). As somebody who does not have to earn his living by analyzing literature as sociological documents, I am glad that Stow was brave enough to make changes that subverted such sociological (and historicist!) readings by "reforming" the white people in the novel lest they be typecast as relics from bygone days.

24 Such expectations are of course often not met (see Neumann 1994).

25 Genealogical evidence collected by the anthropologist Elkin in 1928 does not fall neatly into either of these categories. Curiously, none of the historians I have referred to in this paper relied on Elkin's evidence (Elkin 1980, 302).

26 This is not to say that texts of the first category are unusable. Although I do not want to contest Hiery's, Green's, Moran's, or Hempenstall's interpretations of historical evidence in this paper, I am not arguing against contesting them in principle. It is important, however, to be aware of the taintedness of texts in the first category. I am brushing Walter Benjamin (1968, 258–259) against the grain when quoting him here: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the

grain.” How successful such historical materialism can be has been amply proven by Ranajit Guha and other authors associated with *Subaltern Studies*.

27 Such suspicion seems to have informed, among others, Stephen Muecke’s approach to collaborating with Paddy Roe and Krim Bentrerrak in producing *Reading the Country*, a history of the Roebuck Plains by another name (see, in particular, Bentrerrak, Muecke, and Roe 1984, 125–135).

28 A photograph of the memorial cairn surrounded by a group of children serves as the frontispiece in Green’s book (1995, 4) and illustrates the 1984 article “Massacre at Oombulgurri” in the *West Australian* (Harris 1984).

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### *Abstract*

The issue of how the colonial past could be constructed as history is of central importance in Pacific Islands and Australian history. The article approaches this issue by discussing Hermann Hiery's revisionist history of the Madang Revolt of 1904, and various representations of the Forrest River massacres in Western Australia in 1926. It argues for postcolonial histories that are guided by ethical considerations and informed by poststructuralist concerns.

KEYWORDS: Australia, colonialism, ethics, historiography, Papua New Guinea, postcolonialism