

Henry Reynolds. *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*
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With *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Henry Reynolds has exceeded his intention of turning Australian history “inside out.” Through fragments and excerpts pieced together from a range of archival information – diaries, journals, newspapers, official documents – and oral narratives, he has presented the last two hundred years of the history of this continent from the perspectives of indigenous people. This radical retelling of history, although fragmentary, compels the reader’s respect and admiration for those Aboriginal people who fought, at great cost, to co-exist on this continent on their own terms.

Contrary to dominant historical accounts which fail to acknowledge black resistance, give this issue cursory attention, and/or represent the indigene as passive and easily overcome, Reynolds highlights strategic Aboriginal resistance to Euro-Celtic encroachment on traditional life and natural resources. He claims, “Black resistance in its many forms was an inescapable feature of life on the fringes of European settlement from the first months of Sydney Cove until the early years of the Twentieth Century” (67). This text produces credible evidence to consistently substantiate this claim. Invasion and colonisation of this continent was no easy feat, as a pioneer wrote in 1869: “every acre of land in these districts [Sydney and its surrounds] was won from the Aborigines by bloodshed and warfare” (67). As such, the question this information raises is this: how or why was this fun-

damental fact suppressed for so very long and for what purpose? One can only imagine, given the information produced by Reynolds on Aboriginal opposition, that it is an inconvenient truth that could lead to a political-legal quagmire.

Initial gestures of hospitality and peace offered by the Aborigine to the white settler when misunderstood and exploited by whites turned into resentment and also fear. The increasing struggle to maintain traditional lands and lifestyle under mounting pressure motivated attacks, banditry and open conflict against white settlers and settlements. The response of Aboriginal people was not homogenous. Aboriginals challenged Europeans in different ways, employing different methods. They also actively responded to and devised creative ways of circumventing the challenges posed by white settlers. They were adept at adapting to changing circumstances whilst simultaneously seeking ways to retain traditional culture. "They opted for Aboriginal values, settlement patterns, family life, rhythms of work even when that choice meant a miserable level of material comfort" (157).

Yet, there is no hyperbole in stating that every area of Aboriginal existence was severely and irreparably disrupted. Reynolds details some of the disruption in this way:

Increasingly the newcomers impinged on accustomed patterns of life, occupying the flat, open land and monopolising water. Indigenous animals were driven away, plant life eaten or trampled [by cattle, horses and sheep that were introduced] and Aborigines pushed back into marginal country - mountains, swamps, waterless neighbourhoods. Patterns of seasonal migration broke down, areas free of Europeans were over utilised and eventually depleted of flora and fauna. Food became scarcer and available in less and less variety and even access to water was often difficult (72).

Increasing pressure on Aboriginal life led to for example, fighting among clans. In other words, under conditions of increasing stress, Aborigines turned on themselves. Some black women were initially exchanged with the new settlers but later were "deliberately cheated, raped and abducted" by European men. Affectively, the Aboriginal population declined "from about 300, 000 in 1788 to not much more than 50, 000 in little over a century" (127). However, Reynolds tells a parallel story that overshadows and attends the disruption outlined.

Reynolds' text begins with the first sightings by Aborigines of the European landings. News of these visitors travelled very quickly around the continent. Nevertheless, chance encounters with Europeans inspired fear,

curiosity, imagination, and much thought and discussion within indigenous communities. Soon, the exchange of gifts – “shells, ochre, stone artefacts, spears, woven bags, gum and other items” – was replaced by commodities introduced by the Europeans. Tobacco became a habitual favourite. At first, Aborigines believed the Europeans were temporary visitors. Gradually, the Aborigines had to come to some understanding of who these people were and what motivated them. They also had to figure out the ways in which Europeans organised themselves in radically different ways to themselves, and then find ways in which to respond to these terrifying new creatures (human and animal). The fire power of the former was particularly dangerous and contributed to the Aboriginal belief that Europeans “possessed a powerful and malignant magic [which] may have been a factor in limiting Aboriginal aggression” (29).

Early on, the Aborigines were hospitable and optimistic, but they turned hostile when their efforts were exploited and their survival became uncertain and insecure. They were curious, about European artefacts for example, and also astute: they planned and engineered countless schemes to meet communal demands. They were willing to co-exist with the new ‘other’ but were also determined to retain their traditions and customs. They were innovative: European tools were adapted to new uses in their communities; new words were coined to deal with new goods and ideas; and new food sources such as sheep, cattle, and flour were included in their diets. Some attempted to negotiate with Europeans but these attempts proved fruitless. Some adapted, while others took casual labour to supplement traditional lifestyles. Still others found refuge in Christian missions. And a great many took offence.

The “Aborigines reacted quickly and creatively to the settlers” when provoked and/or threatened (168). They categorically resisted assimilation and declined servitude. Aboriginal warriors gathered, deliberated, conducted patient surveillance, and used guns garnered from previous raids to ambush assailants, loot properties and inspire trepidation within isolated colonial properties. Their superior skills of bushcraft guaranteed success. A squatter “on the Gwydir in 1989 believed that the whole British army would be unable to apprehend one tribe in his district: ‘so well acquainted are they with every thicket, reedy creek, morass, cave and hollow tree, in which they can secrete themselves, and so inaccessible to a horse of any white man” (107). Whilst some of these raids were provoked by revenge for European evils committed against kin and clan, many of these excursions were a response to dwindling food supplies and loss of lands that were traditionally used for hunting and gathering, socialising and ceremonies. Reynolds notes how: “All over the continent Aborigines bled as profusely and died as

bravely as white soldiers in Australia's twentieth century wars" (200). *The Other Side of the Frontier* implicitly honours the dead of this unrecognised war and explicitly pioneers the inversion of the last two hundred years of Australian history in favour of an Aboriginal-Australian history.

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