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### ***Victims of the Past? White-Aboriginal relations in Australian historiography in the nineteenth century***

**D**iscussion about the nature and degree of frontier violence has brought Australian historiography into the limelight of public debate (e.g. Windschuttle; Attwood and Foster; Macintyre and Clark; Manne). Historical research has in the past three decades 'uncovered' frontier violence and examined the diverse aspects of frontier history. This research has challenged 'The Great Australian Silence', which held sway from the end of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, holding that Australia was occupied peacefully and without bloodshed and excluding the Indigenous people from its history (Stanner: 18–29).

However, during the first hundred years of the colony, most historians did not hesitate to discuss the controversial and, for Aboriginal people, devastating impact of the expansion of European colonisation that led to violence and dispossession. At the same time, however, they aimed to justify colonisation and praised it in their works as a valuable exercise. Their writings carried an essential ambivalence about the morality of colonisation. Rather than denying or minimising the violence, as twentieth-century apologists of colonisation have done, for the nineteenth-century historians violence was the unfortunate outcome and dispossession the inevitable consequence of colonial advancement.

In this article I will focus on tracing the common features and continuity in the representation of white-Aboriginal relations in seven histories of Australia written between 1819 and 1883. These shared aspects of historiography are best underlined by pointing out the contradictions that were present in historians' works. I acknowledge the difficulty of this kind of generalised approach, as individual historians' attitudes towards Aboriginal people and the

way they discussed white-Aboriginal relations varied greatly in detail from overt racism to generous empathy. Historians' responses also reflected, though did not always follow, broader changes in European disposition from humanitarian attitudes in the early nineteenth century to Social Darwinism and 'scientific' racism in the latter part of the century.

Nevertheless, differences within the historiographic discourse did not undermine its hegemonic ability to retain an enduring and dominant understanding of colonial race relations, even when it accepted challenging views (cf. Lewis 19–20). In addition, despite variations between individual historians, certain telling aspects recur in their writings. Nineteenth-century historians' concern for Aboriginal people was equally a concern for the moral basis of the colony. Though historians of the period condemned the treatment of Aboriginal people and acknowledged their ownership of the land, I will argue they reaffirmed the image of Australia as *terra nullius*, land without owners, and constructed for the colony a present and a future that was free from the burden of the past by projecting the guilt associated with dispossession on other people and other times. I will first provide some background information about these historians, the way they wrote history and the way Aboriginal people were portrayed by them. Then I will examine their analysis of Aboriginal land ownership and white-Aboriginal relations in nineteenth-century Australian historiography.

### **Historiography, Historians and Aboriginal people**

Nineteenth-century Australian historiography was the product of a combination of emerging traditions, such as journals and chronicles, which together gave it form. The historians focused on recording the rapid changes in the present and shaping the future of their country. Thus, their works can often be regarded as acts of national self-definition rather than as strict reconstructions of the past. Nevertheless, as Mark Hutchinson argues, the foundations of Australian historiography were established during the nineteenth century when it was developing and finding its form (Hutchinson 1988, 16, 23, 82, 370-371).

The historians shared the idea that it was possible to reconstruct a systematic study of the past through critical investigation of traces left to the present. Historical narratives were organised into a coherent whole around categories that followed chronological sequence. Nevertheless, this did not result in histories that were free from the personal, cultural, social, political and economic views of the historians or the needs of their contemporary society (Hutchinson 1988: 65–66). Rather they were inter-related with the historian's class, education, profession and religion. Writing history was, quite openly at times, used to support the historians' public role in the colony and advance their political beliefs about the future of the colony. For historians themselves, history was regarded as a school for statesmanship (Macintyre 1987, 14).

The works studied in this article were written by W.C. Wentworth, Henry Melville, J.D. Lang, William Westgarth, John West, James Bonwick and G.W. Rusden. They were educated middle-class white males, the majority of whom were born in the British Isles and belonged to the colonial Establishment. Their works were published before history became established as a profession. Thus, they had careers as journalists, teachers, preachers and in business, as well as studying history (Hutchinson 1989: 117). The historians also took actively part in the political life of the colony. For example Wentworth, Lang and Westgarth became members of the New South Wales legislative council.

W.C. Wentworth, whose work on the colony of New South Wales (1819) was the first book published by an Australian-born colonist, was a barrister and a landowner who became a significant figure in colonial political and cultural life. Wentworth's political rival John Dunmore Lang, who also wrote about New South Wales (1834), was a Presbyterian minister and radical democrat. Henry Melville's work on Van Diemen's Land was published in 1835. He was a journalist and a publisher. William Westgarth was a Melbourne-based businessman who wrote about the early colonial history of Victoria in 1848. John West, Congregational minister and journalist, and James Bonwick, a schoolteacher and historian, both wrote extensively about the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Their works were published

in 1852 and 1870. In his work Bonwick mentions many personal meetings with Aboriginal people (see e.g. (1870) 1969: 279–285). George Rusden had a career in education and civil service. His *History of Australia* (1883) has been regarded as the most ambitious of the nineteenth-century Australian histories. Rusden had considerable knowledge of the Aboriginal way of life and he also spoke an Aboriginal language (Reynolds 1990: 30).

During the first half of the nineteenth century histories were written drawing heavily on testimonies and first hand experience and the use of written sources was only limited. Historians' works were straightforward narratives that described the consequences of past imperial and colonial official policies and argued for changes to create a different social order. Ideas about 'scientific' historiography reached Australia in the late nineteenth century.

Historians such as James Bonwick and G.W. Rusden increasingly relied upon and argued for the use of official documents as source material. However, in their works these influences came across more in polemics than in methodology. The focus in historiography had shifted from political argument to the search for an historical identity (Macintyre 1987: 1, 7–8, 19–20).

Colonial historians responded to and built upon the works of their predecessors. They created a dynamic internal process in which, for instance, Lang responded to Wentworth's work and West responded to Lang's work (Hutchinson 1988: 116). In relation to their representation of Indigenous people this was most apparent in the way that later historians used David Collins' descriptions (West: Vol. I, 14, 33; Bonwick 1870: 65, 96; Rusden: Vol. I, 47, 87, 131–132). Collins produced one of the first extensive historical records of the colony. He was the deputy judge advocate of the newly established colony, and responsible for its legal establishment. Collins has been described as the first colonial historian (Ward 196), though Collins' work merely recounted the early years of the colony in the form of a chronicle. The first volume of his *An Account of the English colony in New South Wales* (1798) contained an appendix that examined Aboriginal people and their culture in the Port Jackson area.

Nineteenth-century Australian historiography was informed by European imperial discourse (Macintyre 1998: 339), and was influenced by contemporary understandings of racial difference. The typical way of describing Aboriginal people in historical works was by way of detailed portrayals of their physical and supposed mental characteristics. These hypothesized attributes were then used to categorise Aborigines within the Eurocentrically-determined racial hierarchy. Historians deployed the assumed characteristics of Aboriginal people as signs of their inferiority. As with Collins' description of Aborigines in his *An Account of the English colony in New South Wales*, these quasi-anthropological descriptions were commonly located in a separate chapter or section of the text, excluded from the preceding historical discussion (see Westgarth; West; Rusden). Thus, Aboriginal people were situated in timeless and unchanging space, separate from the linear record of the colonial history (cf. Attwood viii). Historians' anthropological interests reflected the development of the natural sciences from the late eighteenth century, which categorised humans scientifically and systematically.

The Aboriginal culture that nineteenth-century historians described was for the most part the culture of Aboriginal men. Just as European society was phallogocentric, European representations of Aboriginal society ascribed women to the margins of culture. Nevertheless, most historians discussed the position of women in Aboriginal society and in the family structure in particular, for the treatment of women was seen as an index of civilisation in the nineteenth-century European thought (Lewis 22).

In their descriptions historians focused mainly on how badly women were treated by Aboriginal men. They also disapproved of the enormous workload that women were expected to bear. (Melville: 62; Westgarth: 67–69; West: Vol. II, 79–80; Bonwick 1870: 55–56, 60–61, 74–76; Rusden: Vol. I, 102, 110). Thus, the role of Aboriginal women in nineteenth-century Australian historiography was that of victim. Descriptions of their ill treatment emphasised the superiority of Europeans and the legitimacy of colonisation (McGrath 1995: 37–38). Only Bonwick questioned the right of Europeans to judge the

behaviour of Aboriginal men. He wrote "When woman has her real rights in Britain, men may speak more freely in condemnation of customs elsewhere" (Bonwick (1870) 1969: 309).

The level of Aboriginal civilisation was also measured from the way Aboriginal women behaved, not only from how they were treated. In some respects historians' expectations were fulfilled. For example, they mostly described Aboriginal mothers as loving and caring (West: Vol. II, 79; Westgarth: 64; Rusden: Vol. I, 102). On the other hand, they often speculated whether or not Aboriginal women had 'the virtue of chastity'. Westgarth, for example, thought they lacked modesty. He (1848: 69–70) wrote that they were in "promiscuous" intercourse with white men. It is interesting to note that Westgarth scrutinised only the immorality of Aboriginal women even though men of a 'civilised' race were also taking part.

In European middle-class society, women in particular were subjected to strict sexual norms while men were allowed more 'liberties'. The perceived inability of Aboriginal men to control Aboriginal women's sexuality implied their inability decorously to manage their society. According to Westgarth (1848: 69), the attitudes of Aboriginal people towards sexuality made them incapable of 'civilisation'.

Historical writing, similar to other forms of colonial writing, simultaneously expressed attraction and admiration towards, as well as contempt and disapproval of, Indigenous people. Homi Bhabha notes that colonial discourse utilised mimicry, that is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha: 86, emphasis in original). This discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence. For example, West expressed no doubt about the inferiority of Aboriginal people compared to Europeans even though he also emphasised their humanity and showed understanding towards differences between Aboriginal and European cultures. He wrote about an Aboriginal man who told his people that his death was near and how he prepared for his funeral. "This is touching. A savage preparing for his funeral, with a calm consciousness of his fate" (West: Vol. II,

92). While West showed admiration for the person about whom he was writing, at the same time he represented him as a savage. The Indigenous person was represented as almost an equal human being, but not quite.

In historiography, the belief in European culture and its superiority was strong. This was reflected in the way that those who wrote it described Aboriginal people and their culture as subordinate and primitive. Representations of Aboriginal women and their treatment further underlined the differences between Aboriginal people and Europeans. The historians also represented the Aboriginal family as improper, arguing that it was unable to fulfil the central purposes of the nuclear family, such as taking care of women. Even though many historians described Aboriginal mothers as loving and caring, the way in which Aboriginal men were portrayed did not fit the ideals of husband and father.

These negative representations of Aboriginal family life would have helped to justify on their part colonists' interference in Aboriginal family practices. According to Anna Haebich, Aboriginal children were removed from their families from the earliest contacts onwards. Throughout the nineteenth century this practise was sanctioned by the colonial authorities and then eventually taken over by them. Child removal, followed by the disordering of Aboriginal families and family culture, was an integral part of the destructive forces of colonisation in Australia (Haebich 130).

### **Legitimising colonisation**

The nineteenth-century historians acknowledged Aboriginal people as the original owners of Australia in their writings (Melville 23, 84, 122; Westgarth 99–100). From the middle to the end of the nineteenth century it also became common to discuss Aboriginal rights to the land — though often in the past tense. West noted that it would have been essential to define the interest of Aboriginal people to their land in the process of colonisation. He argued that Aboriginal people had specific boundaries that defined the area of each 'tribe' and within these boundaries they moved at regular intervals, not aimlessly. West (1852: Vol. II, 20–21, 93) remarked

that they should have been granted land since even convicts were eligible to receive land grants. Bonwick and Rusden also regarded Aboriginal people as the possessors of the soil and noted that it would have been easy to recognise their ownership patterns. Instead they had been dispossessed with no compensation (Bonwick (1870) 1969: 31, 78, 215, 327; Rusden: Vol. I, 2, 95; Rusden: Vol. II, 511). Rusden further noted that Aboriginal people had occupied Australia long before the European colonisers.

Aboriginal violence was commonly seen as a reaction to their dispossession in Australian nineteenth-century historiography. For example, according to West, Tasmanian Aboriginal people were very attached to their country. Thus, they were not indifferent to the rapid occupation of it (West: Vol. II, 20–21). Bonwick ([1870] 1969: 29, 129, 215, 226) also remarked that Aboriginal people resisted the occupation of their land. He noted that patriotism was usually admired, but because of the selfishness of the colonists, Aboriginal people were not praised for their heroism.

At the same time, the historians commonly described Aboriginal people as naturally friendly people who had been provoked to hostilities by violent treatment, not by dispossession (Wentworth 116–117; Lang: Vol. I, 37–38; Melville 23–25; West: Vol. II, 8, 10, 15, 18, 33, 60; Bonwick 27, 43, 49–50, 106). In their works there is an underlying assumption that if treated well Aboriginal people would have willingly shared their country and adopted a European way of life, and thus peaceful co-existence of Aboriginal and European people would have been possible.

The underlying narrative describing frontier conflict followed the logic of colonial discourse whereby the actions of Europeans, who were superior beings, determined how the relationship between white and Aboriginal people would develop. In tune with Enlightenment ideas, the historians believed that by good example and guidance Europeans could have brought 'civilisation' to Aboriginal people, as a compensation for the loss of land, and there would have been no need for violence (See Gascoigne 159).

The violent acts committed by Aboriginal people were included as part of the histories, even though it was emphasised that Aboriginal people were not aggressive by nature. Only Rusden omitted discussion of this issue. For instance, according to West, "Death, by the hands of savage, is indeed invested with the darkest terrors" (West: Vol. II, 35). West (Vol. II, 42–44) also included an "Official List of Atrocities Committed by the Natives" that listed the attacks, and their consequences, committed by Aboriginal people against Europeans in 1830 in Van Diemen's Land. The occasional portrayal of Aboriginal people as 'savage' aggressors represented the colonists as victims, and in reversing the roles of the invader and the invaded justified the actions of the colonists as defending themselves (Curthoys 193.)

However, Aboriginal people were much more commonly represented as victims. The historians noted that the killing of Aboriginal people was common and accepted in the colony. Henry Melville wrote "if it were possible in a work like this to record but a tithe of the murders committed on these poor harmless creatures, it would make the reader's blood run cold at the bare recital" (Melville 23–26). Bonwick recorded how shooting Aboriginal people was like "bringing down a bird" (58). He further noted that since the Aboriginal Tasmanians' right to the land was not respected, it was no surprise that also their personal rights received little respect. Rusden (Vol. I, 575) recounted that colonists shot Aboriginal people like wild animals, and did not attempt to hide these deeds. He illustrated the mentality in the colonies by referring to the popular tenets of Social Darwinism: "No peace was hoped for until the most active and daring could be killed, and, the fittest being swept away, the decay of the miserable remnant would leave the land to the destroyer" (Rusden: Vol. I, 380).

Aboriginal people were portrayed as victims rather than agents by the nineteenth-century historians. This emphasis brought out the violence of the frontier and the treatment of Aboriginal people, and allowed the historians to express their disapproval. In this process a historical narrative was constructed in which colonisers became victims of their own actions — a narrative in which the future had to

be built on an unsettling violent past. Thus, there also remained the need to explain why the process of colonisation had been so violent, and to reason who was responsible for the frontier conflict.

### **Projection of Guilt**

The nineteenth-century historians recognised that Aboriginal people had been dispossessed of their land. They also noted the negative impact that the expansion of European colonies had on the lives of Aboriginal people and acknowledged that this process had resulted in a great degree of violence and death. Nevertheless, they tended to project the guilt on someone or somewhere else — other people, other institutions or another time.

Class played an important role in the analysis of contact history. Lower classes, convicts in particular, were seen as the main villains in the frontier conflict. For instance, Lang (1834: Vol. I, 35–38) reasoned that it had been an impossible task for Governor Phillip to maintain a peaceful relationship with Aboriginal people, since the white population of the early colony consisted of such bad characters. West (1852: Vol. II, 8, 15, 17, 22–23) also regarded the “lower orders”, such as bush rangers and convicts, as the original antagonists. The lower classes did not reach the moral standards set by the middle-class historians and hindered the process in which colonisers would have educated Aboriginal people by example.

The historians also criticised the colonial and imperial governments for neglecting Aboriginal people. Melville criticised Governor Arthur's Aboriginal policy and noted that the destruction of Aboriginal people was “authorised by the Chief Authority” (Melville 1835: 83). According to Rusden (1883: Vol. I, 132–133, 198, 375, 382, 529–532, 575–576; 1883: Vol. II, 15), every governor, except Governor Phillip, had neglected their duties to protect Aboriginal people and punish the crimes committed against them. In his opinion the Governor tacitly approved crimes against Aboriginal people that were not surveyed or punished. West thought that the crown should have taken care of Aboriginal Tasmanians and protected their rights. Instead, he argued, the imperial government had “washed their hands and averted their eyes; and threw upon the colony the

responsibility of inevitable crime" (West: Vol. II, 94. See also West: 93, 95). Hence, because of the neglect of the imperial government, colonists were, according to West, faced with a situation in which the only possible result was the "disappearance" of the Aboriginal people.

Melville, Bonwick and Rusden also pointed out the inequalities of the British legal system towards Aboriginal people (Melville 32, 35, 59–60; Bonwick 72–73, 327, 333; Rusden: Vol. II, 354; Rusden: Vol. III, 229). Even though in theory the law was supposed to give equally full protection to the Aboriginal people as to all British subjects, the level of prejudice was manifest throughout its prosecution. Legal processes were dominated by Europeans who were mostly unsympathetic towards the grievances of Aboriginal people. For example, in New South Wales Aboriginal evidence in courts was not admitted until in the 1870s (Markus 1994, 43–45). Rusden wrote that it was a "mere mockery of justice" to hang Aboriginal people, while they could not give evidence in court (Rusden: Vol. I, 142–143).

Colonists, historians included, commonly believed from the 1830s onwards that the Aboriginal population would become extinct. At first it was explained as God's will (Reynolds 1996: 121–122). Lang saw it as "Divine Providence" that "the miserable remnant of a once hopeful race will at length gradually disappear from the land of their forefathers, like the snow from the summits of the mountains on the approach of spring!" (Lang: Vol. 1, 39). From the middle of the nineteenth century it became more common to refer to reasons based on contemporary social theories, rather than biblical explanations, in order to explain the rapid decrease of the Aboriginal population (Westgarth 123; West Vol. II, 92). Only Bonwick and Rusden challenged the view that the Aboriginal people were destined to disappear towards the end of the nineteenth century. Bonwick argued, quite possibly against Lang's view that the Aboriginal people did not melt away "as the snow of the Alps (...) but were stricken down in their might, as the dark firs of the forests by the ruthless avalanche" (Bonwick 56. See also Rusden: Vol. I, 380).

Believing Aboriginal people to be inevitably an disappearing race or a "doomed" race made unnecessary any other considerations, such as the inequality of British and colonial legislative systems or government neglect, that pointed to different possible outcomes. Based on their quasi-anthropological descriptions the historians categorised Aboriginal people as primitive stone age people destined to disappear, and thus as relics of another time and of belonging to the past (cf. Chakrabarty 243).

It was also common for the historians to see the frontier conflict as belonging to the past. It could be argued that this was natural since as historians they examined the past. However, it is important to note that otherwise there was a strong focus on the present and future of the colony in much of the nineteenth-century historiography (Hutchinson 1988: 363–364). In the case of Tasmania it has been argued that the conflict between the Aboriginal people and colonists was very clear, and the decline of the Aboriginal population easily identifiable (Markus 1977: 170; Biskup 12–13; Griffiths 110). Thus conflict was easily placed in the past and the continuation of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture was silenced. However, when writing about New South Wales in the early 1830s Lang (1834: Vol. II, 112) also noted that contemporary race relations were peaceful. Thus, despite the fact that Lang's work focused on the present and future of the colony, he treated white-Aboriginal conflict as a thing of past. Situating frontier conflict in the past allowed him to discuss troubling issues without questioning the present practices in the colony.

This puts in a different light the notion that Lang as an historian appealed to the national sense of guilt. As several historians have argued, he did emphasise frontier violence (Reece 259; Biskup 12; Hutchinson 1988: 200) "There is black blood, at this moment, on the hands of individuals of good repute in the colony of New South Wales", he stormed (Lang Vol. I, 38). He also condemned past crimes committed against Aboriginal people by colonists. However, he did not address the continuing effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people. Rather Lang, a keen advocator of migration, highlighted the rapid progress of Australia towards a modern

Western nation and thus constructed white Australian identity as one of advancement and opportunities.

The nineteenth-century historians were able to justify the colonisation of Australia by portraying Aboriginal people, the original owners of the land, as a disappearing race and frontier conflict as a thing of the past. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes how part of modernity is the desire to create a "true present" which is produced by wiping out the past — by reducing the past to a nullity. This true present, according to him, is "a kind of zero point in history — the pastless time, for example, of a *tabula rasa*, the *terra nullius*, or the blueprint" (Chakrabarty 244). By representing Aboriginal people, and the frontier conflict that resulted from the colonisation of Australia, as belonging to the past, the historians excluded Aboriginal people from the present and future of Australia. In their representations they reaffirmed the image of Australia as *terra nullius*, a notion helping to foster settlers' sense of the legitimacy of colonisation.

The concept of *terra nullius* was tightly woven together with the idea of wilderness (See e.g. Langton 11–14). The historians also portrayed the Australian natural landscape as wilderness and Aboriginal people as part of it. For example Lang remarked in 1834: "This vast grant of land was doubtless given to the British nation (...) that the wilderness might be filled with cities, and the solitary place with the habitations of men" (Lang: Vol. II, 411). To see Indigenous people as a part of nature was common in nineteenth-century European writing. In the language of the Australian colonisers Indigenous people were commonly made indistinguishable from the environment (Bird 23).

By describing Australian nature as uninhabited wilderness without anthropogenic modification, the historians constructed Aboriginal people as part of nature and denied their humanity and role as active subjects. To contrast the achievements of European culture with the Australian landscape, and with Indigenous inhabitants as a passive part of it, was to celebrate the 'natural' progress of societies towards modernity and the urban state. This perceived pattern of

development was already familiar from Europe, and was used to justify domination and dominion over Indigenous people both in terms of the 'natural' law of economic progress and the authority of classical history (Dixon 4–5). Thus, in the narratives of colonial historiography imperial battles were fought over the land: who owned the land and defined its future and who had the right to settle it (Said xiii). The historians' representation of the land as uninhabited wilderness offered it as open for settlement by Europeans.

The 'Great Australian Silence' began to settle upon Australian historiography towards the end of the nineteenth century. Following the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the present and future of the Australian colony they were also excluded from its past. This change has been explained by racism and the exclusion of Indigenous people from Australian society as well as by the professionalisation of historiography. When history became an academic subject, the past of Aboriginal people was not considered an appropriate topic for historical research. Rather Aboriginal people were seen as solely a topic for anthropological or ethnographic studies (Markus 1977: 170, 175–176; Biskup 12, 14–15). Just as there was a tendency to be silent about Aboriginal people, from the 1870s a new generation of historians started to deny the violence of white-Aboriginal relations and to describe Australia as a country that had been occupied peacefully with no bloodshed (Blair 1; Labilliere Vol. II, 349).

An exception to the emerging silence was Rusden (1883: Vol. III, 227) who noted that an essay written about Australia for the New York Centennial exhibition made no mention of Aboriginal people. Rusden emphasised the fact that frontier conflict was still present in contemporary society. He remarked that the way Aboriginal people had been treated, "has been, nay, even now is (1877) a sin crying aloud to the covering heavens, and the stars the silent witnesses, can be denied by none who know the course of Australian history" (Rusden: Vol. I, 133).

## **Conclusion**

The representation of Aboriginal people and their culture, the

Australian landscape and white-Aboriginal relations in nineteenth-century historiography was a part of the political act of colonialism. Most historians felt empathy towards Aboriginal people and acknowledged them as the original owners of the land. However, they shared European imperial and colonial discourses, which saw the expansion of the British Empire and the colonisation of Australia as inevitable. European superiority and their right for colonisation was taken for granted and it was highlighted in the descriptions of Aboriginal people, their culture and the land desired for colonisation.

Thus, it was not colonisation that was questioned in historiography, but the means by which it was carried out. The historians discussed the violence that had followed the establishment of the colony and condemned the treatment of Aboriginal people.

Ann Curthoys (186, 199) points out that present debates over how many people were killed in the course of Australian colonisation, and why, are debates about the moral grounds of British settlement in the past and Australian society in the present. In a similar manner in the nineteenth century, even though the violent past in itself was not questioned, historians' discussion of the treatment of Aboriginal people and arguments for the justification of colonisation reflected their anxiety with the troubled past and present on which the future of the colony was to be built.

The nineteenth-century historians commonly perceived the decline of the Aboriginal population as inevitable, and saw their destiny as determined by 'Divine Providence' or the 'Law of nature'. Historians also tended to describe frontier conflict as something that had happened in a more distant past. Aboriginal people were victims from the past and of the past. In this way, historians reaffirmed the image of Australia as terra nullius and constructed for the colony a present and future that was free of the burden of the past. However, it was perhaps not only Aboriginal people who were the victims of the past. Historians who tried to free themselves from the past were caught by it. The concern for Aboriginal people rose, not only from more general concern for human beings, but from the worry of what their plight said about 'us'.

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