When I wrote *Aboriginal Australians* (1982) in 1980 I began the preface with these words:

If we as Australians are to face the future confidently, we must be fully aware of the forces that have shaped the Australian experience. We must know ourselves. The study of Aboriginal History is an important part of that self-knowledge. Through it we can hope to understand not only the actions and attitudes of Aboriginal Australians but something of the nature of European Australians as well. Australia’s history since 1788 has been a story of black and white, acting upon and interacting with each other in a great human drama. Yet until recently the Aborigines rarely appeared in our history, so that we have been presented with half a history – half an Australian experience.¹

There was both a great innocence and a great truth in these words.

The innocence of this piece was that I did not really conceive in 1980 that what I called ‘the study of Aboriginal History’ might soon be referred to by Aboriginal activists as the white history of Aboriginal people. They inferred that non-Aboriginal writing of their history was not the same as their version, which they claimed as Aboriginal History. Then again, I probably sensed this in a vague fashion, for I showed my manuscript to Colin Bourke and his team at the Monash University Aboriginal Research Centre. It seemed to be the right thing to do. Thankfully they approved of the book with minor comments. I also tracked down Wandjuk Marika, a Yolgnu elder from Gove in Arnhem Land, who was visiting Melbourne. I asked him if an image of boys in board shorts preparing for a ceremony amidst Coke bottles and other western items - and containing some of his woven designs - could be used for the book’s cover image. In the politest of ways, he quietly said ‘No’, as his work had been misused in the past. I did these things more out of the good manners I had learned from my parents and with some sense of copyright propriety, than any sense of a looming battle over who should write Aboriginal History. As my

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awareness of this issue grew over the years, I was never personally confronted in a public forum on the issue of my right to write, but heard the noise of battle on a distant field and felt fortunate I was not at the front. Indeed my book was accepted across the board and still thrives in a third edition (2001) after 25 years.

The great truth of those words in 1980 was that the study of Aboriginal History (I still call what I do by that name) is an important part of the self-knowledge of all Australians. History helps us whitefellas to realise that we rode to eminence as a nation on more than the back of sheep. Aboriginal land and resources underpinned colonial development.

Australian history has been an engrossing story of two peoples entangled in each others’ lives, distorted by the colonial situation into colonisers and colonised, interacting in a complex human drama of fascinating proportions. This fact of exploitation only dawned upon some Australians because of the writing of Aboriginal History, although Aboriginal people themselves have made many more aware of this fact by their public advocacy over many decades.

The right to write is an enduring question. I faced it again as I commenced my latest book, Aboriginal Victorians, published earlier this year. By the late eighties when I began my research I was now fully aware of the criticisms of a Gubbah like me doing Koori history. Writing about Aborigines by non-indigenous people is as old as settlement itself, and much of it has not been well done. Some Europeans had a whispering in their hearts as Henry Reynolds has shown, but most colonisers wrote for their own purposes. Predominant among these was the need of the ‘usurper complex’, as defined by Albert Memmi in his The Colonizer and the Colonized (1965). This complex caused settlers to ennable themselves and to denigrate the colonised as ‘savages’ and ‘cannibals’ who had never developed the country and did not deserve to hold it. Through such rationalisations and racial ideas that Memmi termed an ‘ideological aggression’, settlers were able to claim the land. Adopting Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’, Bain Attwood has called this view of Aboriginal people ‘Aboriginalism’, meaning the construction of false images for political purposes.

Historical writing can escape ‘Aboriginalism’ by being the best History can be, that is as Attwood outlines: reflexive, compassionate and oppositional. Good historical writing is reflexive when historians are aware of the way sources are shaped by their creators and contemporary discourses, transmitted to the present and selected and ‘read’ by the historian. Bain Attwood, author of The Making of the Aborigines (1989) and other works, is a model of a historian working with a highly-tuned reflexive sense. Good historical writing is compassionate in its resolve to understand the world of others through curiosity, empathy, and imagination. Heather Goodall’s From Invasion to Embassy (1996) practices these historical virtues in her excellent history of land and

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Aborigines in New South Wales, based on a long personal engagement with Aboriginal people. Good historical writing is also oppositional in its determination not to accept prevailing discourses uncritically. It must also be based on the realisation that too often history has been written by the winners. Henry Reynolds is a fine example of an engaged historian, who throughout his ten or more books, beginning with *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), has seen Aboriginal history as inescapably ‘political’. This reflects his own political orientation, honed as it was by the racial atmosphere of spending time in north Queensland in the 1970s, which he outlines in *Why Weren’t We Told?* (1999). But he is inescapably political because he is aware of, and has exposed the politics of, those with opposing views – especially the politics of their silences in the many years when Aborigines were written out of history.

Fine history writing is dependant on skills, imagination and basic human empathy. Well-honed historical skills demand that key questions are asked of sources. Who created this text, from what perspectives, with what agenda and for what audience? What big ideas underpin the document, what is its context, and of what long and ongoing conversation is it a part? Imagination is a key element in well-written history. Historians need to be able to wonder what it was like to be in another place, in another time and in another culture. That requires asking the right questions. They also need to possess a receptive frame of mind to the documents and the voices of the historical actors. Historians also need to have a basic humanity, able to see their historical subjects as people with dignity, not objects to be dispassionately and coldly examined. They need an interest in people’s stories as well as dealing in analysis as is evident in Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers* (2003).

Good historical writing then is not about the race, religion or ethnicity of the historian, but about training and rigor, skills, together with compassion and reflexivity. Kevin Gilbert wrote in the preface of *Living Black* (1977) ‘the real horror story of Aboriginal Australia today is locked in police files and child welfare reports. It is a story of private misery and degradation caused by a complex chain of historical circumstances, that continues into the present’. This story then demands in part the skills of a compassionate, aware historian to be told well. Many nowadays claim to be historians or to write history, but often the outcome is indifferent, lacking historical analysis and often lacking an awareness of the conversations that inform good history. Thus, while Pepper and De Araugo’s, *The Kurnai of Gippsland* (1985) is a very useful work which I have used many times with gratitude, and I say that sincerely, it too often posed Aboriginal people as victims and is at times surprisingly white centred. This is because it was not informed by an important historical conversation on Aboriginal History: how to read ‘against the grain’ to access Aboriginal actions and meanings from white documents as pioneered by among others, Henry Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier*.

You don’t have to be French to write French history, or Catholic to write Catholic history or Aboriginal to write Aboriginal history. This view is

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stultifying and can lead to the death of the historical enterprise. Not only could we not write the history of many pasts because we have not lived there or they are not ‘our people’, but we would be condemned to write only our ‘own history’, what ever that might be, doomed to know only ourselves. It would be as lonely and as sterile as self love.

The entangled history of indigenous and settler peoples in Australia since 1788 has been a bound-together story, that is in the nature of colonialism. However, colonialism is not only a relationship of economic exploitation but psychological potency. Usurpers rationalise their dominance through a racial discourse akin to a form of violence; the colonised have to contemplate their impotency as ‘have nots’ in the new colonial world. At times a strange fraternisation develops, as each influence the other, in complex and unexpected ways, which Anne McGrath has revealed in her Born in the Cattle (1987). In a colonial society each can only be understood as part of the other. Both have been transformed by the colonial relationship into new forms: from indigene and settler to colonised and coloniser. This had been brilliantly documented by Albert Memmi a Tunisian, and also Frantz Fanon from the Antilles, who both experienced French colonialism. Fanon wrote: ‘As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. …[but once he meets the white man] not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man’. Aboriginal History and Australian History then, while seemingly separate, are at the same time one – bound together in a colonial dance that needs to be understood in a conjoined way.

Aboriginal history needs to be open for any Australians to write, as Australian History should also be open to indigenous and non-indigenous versions. The different perspectives brought to bear on our past, challenging each other, converging, and [hopefully] eventually reconciling each to the other, is how Aboriginal and Australian History should be played out. My book Aboriginal Victorians is subtitled: ‘A History Since 1800’, which invites other histories into the space which it now occupies. This approach is also part of the university tradition of open and free discussion: the place where I practice my history. This Enlightenment tradition of a free trade in thought and of toleration is discussed by Adrian Jones who outlined Francois Voltaire’s writing on the Huron Indians of Canada in L’Ingéne (1767). Voltaire imagined the possibility of a Huron perspective on Europe.

The shared nature of our past demands a shared writing of our history. Many historians are now seeking this through the use of oral history and even community driven history. In the fifteen years that my history of Aboriginal Victorians developed, often sidelined by other books, projects and teaching loads, it shifted from a solo, library based study, to a history in its latter half rooted firmly in oral history. Out of this has developed good and ongoing relations with Aboriginal individuals and communities.

5 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press Inc. 1977), 109-110.
When I restarted my history of Aboriginal people in Victoria in 2001, I determined to give as many Aboriginal people a direct role in that history as possible. One of my chosen research assistants under my Australian Research Council grant was an indigenous person. I also wrote to thirty Aboriginal organisations across the state to seek their help and involvement in the project. Silence ensued – as they no doubt pondered: ‘who is this bloke’?. I wrote again, took to the telephone and visited those close to Melbourne to explain my credentials in Aboriginal History and my twenty-five years of teaching experience in Aboriginal History at La Trobe University. This time half a dozen responded. After an exhaustive ethics approval process, the communities provided lists of people for me to interview. My agreement was that I would tape individuals about their life experience as Aboriginal people living in Victoria, transcribe those tapes and return them for checking. In consultation with one community, the process was modified to include a further stage. Once I wrote my manuscript I agreed to show the participants exactly where in the book they appeared, which ones of their many words were being used, and in what contexts. To achieve this I took to the road. Though time consuming, this final 3,000 km drive around Victoria consolidated my attachments with my informants.

My relationship with Aboriginal Victorians deepened and produced some vibrant outcomes. I have since revisited the Budja Budja community of Halls Gap three times with students on safari from America. We have been shown the local rock art by the community; visited their unique Cooperative - the only one in the state that provides medical services for Koori and non-Koori townspeople - and conversed with them over a bush tucker lunch. I am confident this teaching relationship will continue and also through friendships. I am also currently involved in writing the life story of Betty Clements, a Yorta Yorta woman and one of the oral history participants in my book. This collaboration emerged from our interviews for *Aboriginal Victorians* and also *Alick Jackomos: Man of All Tribes* (2006) written with Corinne Manning. My history work is now more shared, more enjoyable, and hopefully closer to finding a truth about Aboriginal History.

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