



Journey to the other side of the frontier: an interrogation

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By Veronica Brady

This conference is a celebratory one, celebrating the achievements of settlement from 1829 onwards, and this is important and proper. But in this paper I would like to look at a different kind of history which is concerned with difference as well as sameness and with the tension between them. The frontier is an important concept in the history of colonisation. But it is a multivalent concept, at least if one accepts Heidegger's proposition that a frontier--he calls it a boundary-- is not a point at which something stops but rather at which something begins. Most historians would agree with that, I suspect, but not perhaps with his further point that 'something' is a reality which '*begins its presencing*' there (Heidegger, 1975: 154), in other words with a challenge which is imaginative, perhaps even metaphysical.

In this paper I want to look at contact on the frontier in Western Australia in these terms, arguing that the reality which 'began its presencing' there interrogated and indeed still continues to interrogate the basic premises of settlement and even our notions of reality and value. Let me explain. Contemporary Australia is the product of imperial history, a history on to which, as Karl Jaspers puts it, was loaded a 'false grandeur...stolen from God' (Kohler and Saner, 1992: 149) which cast us and people like us as the spearhead of Evolution, destined to rule and 'civilise' all 'lesser breeds without the law' whose role, it was assumed, was to become like us or disappear. It is thus preoccupied with time, future time in particular--hence the worship of 'progress' and 'development' --at the expense of place.

The place to which the first settlers came in 1829 was very different from anything they had known. But they were by and large determined to impose their preconceptions on it, to 'build a new Britannia in another world' (Turner, 1968: 12), as W C Wentworth put in New South Wales. Paying little attention to the culture of the peoples who had inhabited the place for many thousands of years, they saw it more or less as an empty stage on which to play out a scenario of power, prosperity and possession.(Carter, 1988: xiv) This was in marked contrast with the perception of Aboriginal people for whom the land was a field of force which more governed their lives so that place became for them what Heidegger calls 'location', 'space into which earth and heaven, divinities and mortals are admitted' (Heidegger, 1975: 154-5) where human beings learn to understand their place in the cosmos and play their part in it--not just in human history.

This may seem an unnecessarily complicated way of saying that a profound cultural gap divided, and often still divides Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. But it suggests that it may be an overstatement to say that for the last 150 years we have been engaged on 'a shared journey'. The point that I want to make, however, is that we may have something to learn from the

other side of the frontier, to what 'begins its presencing' there. It is not merely that it is beginning to appear that land may be much more than an economic resource and that we need to recognise its imperatives more than we have done but also, on a larger scale, as the Governor General has recently argued, in the world which lies ahead of us in the twenty-first century the ability to nurture cross-cultural sensitivity and respect values different from ours may become increasingly necessary. (Jeffrey, 2004: 4) Partnership rather than conflict, being faithful to difference rather than inward-looking absorption in ourselves, he suggests, is the best model for global citizenship.

Settlement is often a hurried and harried business and it is possible that we have ignored some significant steps in the process. To refer to Heidegger again, living properly in a place involves learning to *dwell in* , not merely *building on* it: 'Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man.'(Heidegger, 1975: 157). Mircea Eliade put it less enigmatically when he wrote that the crucial task of people arriving in a place hitherto unknown to them is the 'transformation of chaos into cosmos' (Eliade, 1974: 10), learning to relate to it imaginatively as well as materially, to listen to and live with it--as traditional Aboriginal culture does. In the words of two traditional people welcoming Ronald and Catherine Berndt on to their land:

The country knows who is walking about in it. It can feel who is there. It knows if a stranger comes, and it can get angry--start a bushfire or something.

Not the people doing that, just the country itself. Yes! the country always knows.

(Catherine Landine. In Cameron, 2003: 6)

At the other end of the scale is the view expressed by the learned judge in the case of the land claim of the Yorta Yorta people in Victoria that 'the tides of history' had flowed over the land they had lived in for thousands of years and annulled their rights, a view that effectively dismissed the force of this 'presencing'. Time moving into the future destroys the claims of place.

Here I want to argue that we need to acknowledge this if we are to relate successfully to the place in which we live and that the human and environmental problems confronting us may make this more important than we think. But this may demand a different kind of history which asks questions about the nature of reality and value which imperial history takes for granted. Interpretation, not just preoccupation with 'facts', may be necessary if we are to understand the full significance of the story of the last 175 years in this State. This is why I want to base my argument on a discussion of a work of fiction, Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*, a novel about the clash of cultures, that is of interpretations, in the 1920s the North West on the frontier between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture. That the evidence it offers is fictitious and therefore hypothetical rather than factual, I believe, brings us to

the heart of the problem, the clash of cultures, which have to do with largely unexamined assumptions and feelings which for that reason powerfully influence behaviour, especially on the frontier, a place of uncertainty and anxiety.

Published in 1929 and awarded the *Bulletin* prize for the best novel of the year, it nevertheless had a troubled reception, probably because it spoke what was usually unspoken, the story of a white man's love for an Aboriginal woman. The response of one particularly outraged critic who declared that an Aboriginal woman, 'fly blown and filthy', was not a fit heroine for any decent novel, points to the source of his outrage, taboo, the 'peril of soul' felt in the presence of 'objects, actions or persons that are "isolated" or "forbidden" because of the danger involved in contact with them.' (Ricoeur, 1969: 12). Imperial history has tended to construct Aboriginal people as inferior, often even as disgusting--William Dampier famously called them 'the miserablest people in the world' and their presence was felt as defiling, the feeling which tends to adhere to what is unusual and therefore terrifying but also both repellent and attractive. (Ricoeur, 1969: 12)

Prichard, however, was prepared to challenge its hold, and taboo is the central force at work in the novel. Significantly, however, it works differently on different characters. At one end of the scale Mollie, the white woman Hugh Watt, the central white character, marries for 'hygienic' reasons to preserve the code of white supremacy, reflects a panic response. As poor white woman taken from working in a boarding house in a coastal town to live in the midst of traditional Aboriginal people as the wife of a station owner she has few resources to cope with difference, unsure as she is of her own identity. As Hayden White remarks, the 'dissatisfactions [of people like her] are easier to recognise than [her] programs are to justify' (White, 1986: 151-2)' so that she defines herself in terms of these dissatisfactions, dismissing the Aborigines as 'lazy, filthy and treacherous' and thus convincing herself of 'the divine right of white men to ride rough-shod over anything aboriginal which stood in their way'. (Prichard, 1943: 138)

Mrs Bessie, Hugh's mother, who rules the station 'Wytali' after the death of her ne'er-do-well husband, is a more complex figure. By and large she respects the Aborigines who work for her and treats them with consideration, even in Coonardoo's case, with a certain affection and refuses to interfere with their cultural practices: 'She had never seen any aboriginal who was better for breaking his tribal laws and beliefs, she said. And as long as she lived, aboriginals on Wytaliba should remain aboriginals'. (16) Nevertheless there is no question in her mind that they and the land they live on belong to her and that her culture is superior to theirs. Implicitly she echoes the colonial belief that their occupation of the country was somehow improper since they did not develop it economically. Certainly her great concern is economic, to balance the books and run the station at a profit and pass it on as a going concern to her son Hugh.

She despises men like her neighbour Sam Geary for 'mucking around with gins' (76), the assumption being that he demeans himself by doing so, that 'work's the thing...not sex' (77), as she tells Hugh. He must 'marry white and stick white' (60) and she brings him up to live by a 'code of commonsense'--of her culture, of course-- which will, she believes, 'give him a compass of...cleanliness, moral and physical, to steer by.'(51). Hers is an inflexible and almost obsessive view of the world which has no room for what Levinas calls the 'face' of the other, recognition of those who are different as equally human. (Hand, 1993: 82) Unlike the old pioneer Sam Geary, she seems to have no sense of the violence of settlement which troubles him--'"Thirty years I've been in this country, and there's things I've seen--No black ever did to a white man what white men have done to the blacks"'(138)-- and one must assume that she takes it more or less for granted on the assumption that might equals right.

Certainly her morality rests on the idea of control and she is deeply suspicious of the intuitive and instinctive which is so important in Aboriginal culture. As Sam Geary sees her, she is 'a great little woman...[but] sewed into her pants.'(46) Marriage is a matter of prudential calculation designed to preserve property. So on her death bed she warns Hugh against 'going native' like Geary, telling her to find a "'good [white] girl wanting a husband' and marry her...Sex hunger's like any other. Satisfy it and you don't think about it. I mean...it won't get out of proportion. Work's the thing...not sex' (77), work being the way to profit and power.

This means, however, that despite her liking for the Aborigines who work for her, she is troubled, indeed threatened, by the frank and powerful sexuality of their culture and has 'fits of loathing' for them. She is particularly disgusted by the initiation ceremonies which she sees as 'mere sadism,...a whipping-up of sexual excitement in the cruelties practised by old men on boys and girls.'(27) She also disapproves of the custom of marrying girls to older men. When Warieda, the head stockman wants to marry Coonardoo she regards it as immoral and bribes him with the promise of a horse of his own and new blankets to put it off until she is sixteen. But as well as her distrust of sexuality--she sees Warieda as a 'great brute' (19)--Prichard suggests that the conflict has to do with possession:

She did not object to the idea of Coonardoo being Warieda's woman, but to his interfering with a plan she had made--a plan to attach Coonardoo to herself and to Wyaliba. To take her away, to give her children just yet, would have disturbed that.
(20)

The plan is that when she dies Coonardoo will look after Hugh and be in charge of the homestead. Prichard is quite clear also about the cultural clash involved:

She was jealous of an influence on the child greater than her own. She did not wish to lose Coonardoo. Her people did not wish to lose Coonardoo either. She was theirs by blood and bone, and they were weaving her to the earth and to themselves, through all her senses, appetites and instincts. (31)

The novelist's sympathies, however, are with the Aborigines. This is clear in the scene in which Mrs Bessie comes on a 'half-circle of men sitting 'squatted before a little girl and singing to her breast', singing 'to make her a woman' and is disturbed by it. Yet despite herself she is made to sense 'something impersonal, universal, of a religious mysticism' at work:

'The men looked as if they were worshipping her, squatted there on the wide plains under the bare blue sky. And they were in their own way, she imagined, venerating the principle of creation, fertility, growth in her.'(26)

Similarly one night watching a corroboree she glimpses 'another world, the world mystic, elusive, sensual and vital of this primitive people's imagination' and briefly feels herself 'part of the shadows, of the infinite spaces about her and of the ceremonial dance itself.'(28-9) But her 'white woman's prejudices' (26) are too strong and she banishes these feelings 'peremptorily.'(28-9)

Mrs Bessie then is typical of a colonial culture that thinks itself free to reject everything that is other than itself and with it the embarrassment of trying to relate to what is unknown and different. Confined within its 'closed circle around sameness', (Susin, 2000: 87) it is unable to move across the frontier, intent instead on what Luiz Carlos Susin characterises as its 'great triumphal march' whose greatest triumph perhaps is its 'critical understanding, distinguishing and identifying good and evil in a very particular way, based on itself, on its glorious position as basis and referent of the whole of reality spread out at its feet.'(Susin, 2000: 80)

Hugh, her son, however, is a much more ambiguous figure, drawn to the other side of the frontier as his mother is not. But he is ultimately destroyed by the tension he feels between the two worlds and in the process destroys Coonardoo and her community. On the one hand, as his mother's son and the only white child on the station, even as a child he assumes the authority to order his Aboriginal playmates around and all his life takes for granted the absolute devotion of Coonardoo. On the other hand, growing up with Aboriginal playmates he is aware of the power of their culture and drawn to it in the person of Coonardoo, even though his mother has brought him up to believe that 'work's the thing not sex.'(77)

Left alone after her death, however, he is not so sure, reflecting that:

[It] was all very well for a school-master to preach virginity in the playing field of a boys' school; but here is a country of

endless horizons, limitless sky shells, to live within yourself was to decompose internally. You had to keep in the life flow of the country to survive. (144)

Implicitly and unusually, the novel honours this alternative way of being in the world in which the self is not autonomous but part of the cosmos, giving to and receiving from it and open to a dimension beyond the merely rational, 'the archaic, the nocturnal, the oneiric.' (Ricoeur, 1969: 348) It also suggests that Hugh's failure to respond fully to its claims is disastrous, though he does so briefly after his mother's death when he is desperate with grief. Mrs Bessie has ordered Coonardoo to take care of him when she dies and she follows him everywhere. Although he has always taken her devotion more or less for granted, one night when he has gone off by himself into the bush he realises that she has been following him and he 'has a swift vision of passion and tenderness stalking him' (83). Suddenly overwhelmed by 'deep inexplicable currents of his being [flowing] towards her' (84), he gives himself to her.

This is a key moment in the novel, a moment in effect in which he crosses the frontier, lets his white conditioning go and responds to 'what presences' there, and the implication is that it is life-giving. The story begins with Coonardoo sitting singing 'under dark bushes overhung with curdy white blossoms' and we are told that the melody of her song 'flowed like water running over smooth pebbles in a dry creek bed.' (1) We are also told that Coonardoo is also the name of a well near which she was born, 'the dark well, or the well in the shadows' (2) and this is the image invoked when she comes to him that night, 'her eyes the fathomless shining of a well in the shadows.' (84) Giving himself to her, it is suggested, he 'gave himself to the spirit which drew him from a great distance it seemed, to the common source which was his life and Coonardoo's.' (84)

The result is healing. The next day 'he was more like his old self, quieter, saner' and does not seem to be grieving so desperately for his mother. Seeing the change the Aborigines believe that his 'fibres had been snatched at and attached to the earth so that Mumae [their name for Mrs Bessie] could not draw them away.' (84) But according to her code he has done wrong, broken the taboo and he falls ill, as if, the Aborigines think, Mrs Bessie's 'spirit had come back, entered into [him] and was struggling to take his spirit away with her.' (84) In fact he is taken away to hospital on the coast and when he returns brings with him a white woman as his wife, Mollie who dislikes the Aborigines and is determined to impose on them.

The marriage, however, is a failure. She fails to give Hugh the son he needs to carry on the property, bearing him four girls instead. Increasingly dissatisfied, hating the country and its people she is looking for a way out when one day Winni, Coonardoo's youngest son, is thrown from a horse. Seeing Hugh's evident concern for the boy, she realises that the boy is Hugh's son, not Warieda's. This enables her to blackmail him to let her go away to Perth never to return to live there the life of a wealthy squatter's wife. In the long run her

extravagance together with a run of bad seasons ruins him financially and he is forced to sell out to his old enemy Sam Geary and leave Wytaliba.

Before this, however, he is left alone and, obedient still to Mrs Bessie's orders, Coonardoo moves into the homestead to look after him. But his mother's influence prevents him from sleeping with her, though he is drawn to her still. Coonardoo cannot understand this and is troubled by it. One day, however, when Hugh is out mustering, Sam Geary who has long coveted Coonardoo comes to Wytaliba and rapes her. When Hugh discovers, he flies into a rage of jealousy, comes to her in the camp and knocks her into the fire, leaving her there and striding back to the homestead.

Next morning, however, he comes back to look for her. But she has disappeared and is never seen again, only to return years later to die after Hugh has left Wytaliba, puzzled to the end by Hugh's rejection of her. He 'had sent her away, driven her far from the place where she belonged, her place and the place of her people' (274) and his pride had destroyed her and her community. The story, which began with Coonardoo as a child singing under the flowering tree, ends with an image of death. The fire she has been sitting by has gone out:

'Blackened sticks lay without a spark. She crooned a moment, and lay back. Her arms and legs, falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire.'(275)

It is an image of destruction. But Prichard suggests that things could have happened differently if the two cultures had been able to learn from and share with one another. She also suggests that it was white culture, with its suspicion of the intuition and instinct, lack of respect for the land and its determination to remain in control, which was the destructive factor. Hugh's eldest daughter Phyllis (who loves the land and returns to it) understands this: her father was 'a good ordinary little man who...tried to make a Galahad of himself...[but whose] repressions... rotted in him' (265), keeping him imprisoned in a destructive and disabling culture, unable to give himself to its people and out of tune with the land.

The pity of it is that from time to time Hugh's feeling for Coonardoo enabled him to cross the frontier, though taboo finally and destructively drew him back. But Prichard insists that it was she who was 'the one sure thing in his life', offering a larger vision of reality, a 'force in the background of his life, silent and absolute. Something primitive, fundamental, nearer than he to the source of things: the well in the shadows' (144) Denting it he destroyed himself since, as Ricoeur points out, 'Cosmos and Psyche are two poles of the same "expressivity"; I express myself in expressing the world; I explore my own sacrality in deciphering the world.'(Ricoeur 1969: 13)

As a Marxist, it is true that Prichard would probably have suspected the word 'sacrality'. But her work as a whole indicates that she did not believe that

empiricism alone, much less economic rationalism, provides access to the full range of human possibility. At the very least she was concerned to find the wider sense of humanity which Hugh achieves from time to time with Coonardoo, a humanity far beyond narrow divisions of 'black' and 'white': 'He had to remind himself of her dark skin and race...and had never been able to think of [her] as alien to himself'. (144) Similarly, as the 'well in the shadows', she put him in tune with the living world around them.

It is possible to dismiss this as mere romanticism. But contemporary science is increasingly suggesting that, as Einstein put it, 'human beings are part of the whole which we call the Universe, a small region in time and space' and that for that reason 'our task should be... [to open] up our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty'. (In Clayton, 1975: 127) If this is so we may need to rethink some of our cultural premises. It may be, for instance, that the attempt to establish a 'new Britannia in another world' is misguided and we may have much to learn from the culture for which, in the words of Patrick Dodson, '[I]and is a living place...It belongs to me. I belong to the land, I rest in it. Land is a notion that is most difficult to categorise in English...but it provides for my spiritual needs. It is a regeneration of stories.'(In Hannah, 2004: 298) That, however, needs discussion at another time.

For the moment I have been arguing that the imperial model of history which, Susin argues, echoes the story of Ulysees who left home and travelled through strange places but always with the intention of returning home (Susin, 2000: 79)--or, in our case, making that strangeness as much as possible like home--has had destructive consequences. My reading of *Coonardoo* suggests that, as Susin would have it, a more appropriate model of colonisation is the figure of Abraham, prepared to go beyond the horizon of what is already known and is open and vulnerable to the approach of the other. (Susin, 2000: 88) Prichard, I think, would agree. For her the frontier was not a place at which something stops but where something begins. If that is so, the crucial task of settlement is not economic but the 'transformation of chaos into cosmos'.

In the light of the environmental crisis and many other problems facing us at the moment this is surely worth consideration. Places do not naturally occur but, as Gary Catalano observes, are created by human beings, are therefore not merely geographical entities but also 'the most accurate image of what we imagine ourselves to be.' (In Hannaah, 2004: 300) If this is so it may be that the 175th anniversary of the foundation of Western Australia offers an occasion to reconsider who we might imagine ourselves to be.

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