

"Their graves are green, they may be seen": Geoff Page's Visible Histories

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Abstract: Geoff Page's most sustained approach to settler history as twinned achievement and failure appears in the triptych: *Invisible Histories* (1989), *The Great Forgetting* (1996) and *Freehold* (2005). In these mixed-genre texts Page writes obsessively from within the contemporary dispensation of the politics of regret, searching for registers and modes in which responsible witness may be carried out with respect to the foundational historical myths of the nation. The problem with foundation chronicles for the ancestors of people who invaded, murdered and appropriated the land of others can be referred to the current debate around the notions of "guilt" and "shame". Despite Page's collaboration with the Aboriginal artist Pooaraar in *The Great Forgetting*, and his ambition to bring differing stories into a useful confluence, the task of writing a healing history might be impossible for reasons that lie beyond the writer's strategies or good-will.

Key words: History, Memory, Poetry

Geoff Page's sizeable body of work ranges widely across the quotidian experiences of struggling with daily life, battles against weather, health and time, and the dreams and desires of rural or small town existence. Inevitably, however, contemporary dispensations for dealing with the relation of white people to themes of survival, memory or attachment to place activate a present-day "cultural politics (...) that is concentrated and contested around the binary opposition of the colonized indigenous (or more commonly Aboriginal) and the colonizing diasporic white newcomer or settler," in Lynette Russell's words (2). Page's work is no exception, his most sustained approach to these issues appearing in his triptych of histories: *Invisible Histories* (1989), *The Great Forgetting* (1996) and *Freehold* (2005). In these texts Page writes from within the present-day awareness of the politics of reparation, searching for registers and modes in which responsible witness may be carried out with respect to the foundational historical myths of the nation. This activity occurs within a framework to the telling of history in which the histories of settling have come to seem unsettling and unable to be inhabited unproblematically. Sympomatic of this is Page's returning obsessively to some of the same matters in the three books: the settling of portions of the Clarence River in the Grafton region where he grew up.

Jeffrey Olick scrutinises the notion of collective memory in *The Politics of Regret*. Although Olick points to the ways in which collective memory can be seen as

something that is secure and shared, or alternatively as something that is constantly being contested and rewritten, he indicates that it has most generally been seen in group identity studies in terms of its function of articulating a community as a “‘community of memory,’ one that does not forget its past,” so that “[c]ollective memory thus refers to the group’s sense of itself as a continuous entity through time” (86). Olick’s special interest is in that community comprised of Germany, but the particular problems these considerations raise in the case of a settler-invader community, not to mention the community called Australia, are easily apparent. Apart from the fact that colonial emigration to distant places decisively interrupted and disturbed the settling group’s “sense of itself as a continuous entity through time,” the only group in Australia that could inhabit that sense of continuity unproblematically was precisely the group whose comfort as a community was being shattered and destabilised by the newcomers. Ironically, in order to occupy the comfort of a sense of continuity and develop a new collective memory, some of the very foundations of the newcomers’ history had then to be denied or forgotten. The situation is marked in Page’s titles: *Invisible Histories* and *The Great Forgetting*, which itself becomes a phrase used several times in *Freehold*.

The problem with the notion of belonging for the ancestors of people who invaded and appropriated others’ land, murdering them if they got in the way, can be referred to the current debate around the notions of “guilt” and “shame”. But where this debate has centred on such issues as the relation of Germans to the Nazi period, or our relation to events that go on around us such as Darfur, Rwanda or East Timor, it encounters a different range of issues when applied to a history in which undeniable achievement and success are also apparent. Moreover, while Germans may repudiate every aspect of the Nazi period in their nation’s history, they are not denying their right to be German or to inhabit the space they inhabit. They do not approach the need to reexamine their very legitimacy that can afflict the descendants of white settlers. Page returns to the same histories because he is continuing to strive for a register and a weighing of events that articulates both the shame and the pride, as well as accounting for the deep feeling of belonging that settlers and their descendants develop, rejecting the polarised historical positions summed up by Miriam Dixon as those of “idealisers and demonisers” (1). In this he is not alone, either in Australia or elsewhere, but rewriting the same events three times in different books has to be considered unusually persistent.

Despite dealing with the ostensible newness of European encounters with a land and its Indigenous people in his poetry set in the past, one of the characteristic features of Page’s work is a concentration on endings, on failure and death, on what Dennis Haskell identifies as poems that “are often poised on the edge of loss” (282), and here too Page revisits the obsessions of a type of classic Australian literature. In this activity, he becomes not only the inheritor of a type of discourse but a remaker of some of its outlines, and a proponent of their ongoing relevance as ways of rethinking the history and values whose shape and priorities are continually modulating. Page’s poetry often speaks to Mark McKenna’s realisation when he investigated the area in southern NSW where he had bought property that not only is there a generally widespread ignorance of the Aboriginal history of an area, but colonial history is often just as invisible: “With few exceptions, there was little local knowledge of the ‘distant’ past—whether the indigenous past or the pioneer past. For many people I spoke with, the past was something that began when they were born” (5). Whether in his shorter sketches of small-town Australian life—for example, the melancholy fading of the meaning of rural

churches for their communities, “Back-road Churches” (*Selected Poems*, 5)—or in his longer works, Geoff Page is attempting to establish a record of the passing of stories on the one hand, and to construct versions of those stories so as to keep some of them alive.



In *Invisible Histories* many of what Page considers the most relevant of the nation's stories are so different they cannot be melded into a single narrative account, or even into the same mode of telling. The broken-up mosaic of stories begins with a tale of discovery, of an insatiable curiosity even in the face of tradition and settled wisdom, and of the pleasure in coming across a place that is unknown to the brave explorer, a classic pattern in the history of settler nations, except that this tale occurs in an unknown period before European invasion, and the brave explorer is Joogoomoo, drawn to find out what lies over the water. From this sly reslanting of the classic foundational moment in traditional history-telling, Page jumps to 1841 and a brief dispatch dealing with an atrocity committed against Aborigines in the Clarence River district. This atrocity constitutes the beginning of European history in his account, the foundational tale, which, moreover, is not told in the form of a prose dispatch but in the broken lines of poetry. The Aboriginal tale is told in sequential prose, albeit with some markers and explanations taken from a putatively non-European explanatory grid, when the Indigenous past is commonly construed as only existing in forms of oral discourse, articulating the sacramental and mythic constantly, and incommensurable to outsiders. While much of this way of perceiving Indigenous stories is attempting to pay respect to the values and protocols of Aboriginal cultures, it could also be seen as obfuscating other types of Indigenous stories and denying commonality, rejecting what Marc Augé describes as the inhabitation of contemporaneous worlds, worlds in which we feel connected with each other's projects. Page reverses the modes, ascribing prose to the Indigenous story and verse to the invaders' story, in a diptych in which the bravery and large-heartedness of the Aborigine are set against the cowardice and meanness of the Europeans, the latter appearing even more shocking when rendered in the mode formerly reserved for would-be ennobling and lofty Victorian reflection and observation. The invisibility of the stories, then, refers not just to their being the types of stories once sidelined in Australian histories, but from their now being told by Page in unfamiliar guise. By recasting unfamiliar or partly-familiar stories in unfamiliar literary modes Page suggests that not only have we not paid attention to particular histories, but that we have cast them in literary protocols that have made them overfamiliar and made it even more difficult to step outside the frameworks in which we once tended to see the types of story that make up Australian histories. However, rather than rejecting the stereotypes of this literary history, Page aligns with Homi Bhabha's consideration of the stereotype as constituting “a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive [which] demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself” (70). That is, in Page's work formerly stereotypical literary modes—bush ballads and settler yarns—along with the stereotypes of Australian myths of white identity are constantly revisited in a process whereby their energy can be released precisely in the gap between their classic uses and their uses according to revised contemporary priorities.

Invisible Histories runs through many of the established topoi of Australian history, its longest section dealing with a pioneer named Edward Coaldale. The sections that deal with his story are told in prose, albeit often also in the epistolary structure that will return in the first part of *Freehold*. Edward was sent by his family to NSW to work on a sheep-run, a temporary experience which his father is confident “will be of no little value in stiffening your general character” (40). Soon, Edward is asking for money to take out a lease on his own property, and the section develops by way of brief prose extracts not only from letters to and from a range of people, but also from official documents, apparent diary entries, a work of local history, and a label referring to a photograph. This mosaic structure has been used successfully in widely-differing contexts as a way of speaking the angles and materiality of history (Glancy 1996, Jones 2000), and Page’s use of it here demonstrates a fine weaving together of narrative interest and the many-sided energies of events. These events are deftly carried through to the present when the two principal stories of Australian relation to place in the last two hundred years, that of the local Indigenous people and that of the settling families, are both revealed to have faded as property has passed from hand to hand. Coaldale left his property to Toolbadgery, who left it to Jimberoo who was bought out by other landowners, and unable to enter the land-owning, rates-paying cash economy that the occupation of property in the Western sense entails. Toolbadgery’s descendants now own no property, and dream unavailingly of reestablishing a connection with their ancestral land, while one of Coaldale’s descendants visits from England to discover that her ancestor’s grave is overgrown and his story unknown and irrelevant to the land’s present owners.

These twinned absences, however, are not so much parallel as causally related. The rupture that exists between many Aboriginal people and their connection to land they once inhabited is felt in this invisible history to be derived not just from having been dispossessed, but from the installation of an instrumental way of relating to land that destroys the possibility of returning to the habitation and comfort of the past for everybody. Edward Coaldale’s legacy of his land to Toolbadgery cannot fulfil his hopes, for it exists within a legal framework that makes it easy for Europeans to get the land away from people who are not inserted into the discourses of ownership and exclusion in the ways structured by English law. This is implicit in *Invisible Histories*, but *Freehold* makes it explicit in a title that compresses the desperation of settling and owning land, a hint of the price that was not paid, and the pugnaciousness of holding on to what has been gained.

While the title, *Freehold*, appears to relate centrally to an economic relation to place, the subtitle “Verse Novel” undercuts the legal solidity of the main title by speaking it in the imaginative form of verse, the term “verse” signalling the most uneconomic register possible in contemporary discourse. More than this, however, what seems like Page’s adherence to an old-fashioned literary form is a way of foregrounding the textuality of history. The story that had been told in *Invisible Histories* in prose documents returns in *Freehold* in verse, flagging its constructed nature and moving away from the naturalising register of the historical account rendered via supposed documentational prose. Verse thus becomes a more transparently perspectival strategy in which we recognise history constructed as a narrative, emanating from voices that are never disinterested. Marc Augé suggests in *Oblivion* that “we are living more and more in a world invaded by images and fiction, but this time it is a fiction that has no nameable

author” (35). Poetry is a form that insists on its composed nature, disallowing the possibility of dwelling within the type of stories with no nameable authors that circulate as received traditions and underwriters of community. Even in Page’s comfortably fluid verse rhythms, the enforced interruption at the end of each short line calls across the gap to the reader to keep the narrative going. In a recent celebrated verse novel that also attempts to revisit a violent colonial history (the Mau Mau opposition to British rule in Kenya), Adam Foulds’s *The Broken Word*, Foulds explains why he chose to use the resources of poetry rather than prose:

I wanted the technical resources of poetry, particularly the ability to break lines, to accomplish the violence that is central to the work. A line end is a like a corner the reader has to turn to continue on and these can be used to reveal shocks. (Thwaite)

Moreover, by yoking contemporary attitudes, events and characters to recognisably classic verse rhythms and patterns, Page implicates the comfortable myths of and about the past in the present. This has the result of suggesting that the ways our ancestors talked about what they were doing can still be used, but to talk about it differently; that is, the poetic forms and strategies of the past are not themselves irremediably complicit with the brutal ideologies of the Australian frontier, and just as the narratives of history have been rewritten, so also the forms in which it was told can be reclaimed and retained for a fairer vision.

In this vision, Page tests the limits of a history in which colonisation was erected upon brutality and violence, but which also contained decency. The last section of *The Great Forgetting* had ended with a farmer, his wife, the farmer’s brother (Ray Whitby, a historian), and an equal number of Bundjalung people sitting round a table discussing what to do about the historian’s uncovering of a hushed-up local murder of a Bundjalung family on the adjoining property to that of Coaldale. They decide that as well as writing it up in Ray Whitby’s local history, there should be a monument, and soon after the book ends. It is an ending that is talking about duly remembering the past, and including the murdered within the wider family of the whole district, but it is still just talk around a wine-lubricated table. Clearly, the story was still unfinished for Page, as it was for the poem’s characters, and so *Freehold* took this section, along with small portions of the rest of the book, in addition to sections of *Invisible Histories*, and wrote it again at much greater length. In *Freehold* various angles on ownership are dealt with over different periods of time: one in the mid nineteenth century, the other in a more contemporary period. In the period beginning in the 1840s the poem uses different voices to chronicle the relation of Edward Coaldale to a property he runs sheep on and acquires freehold, but which, anticipating his early death, he tries to leave to local Aborigines. From the first he is discussed by local women as an eligible catch, except that “[t]he only problem so far is/his attitude to blacks” (13). Coaldale learns a lot of the local Bundjalung language, trusts Aborigines with positions of responsibility on his station, and “[t]hey say he likes to talk their talk/and eat beside their fire” (19; the writing of sympathetic white characters in these terms has now well-and-truly entered popular imagery, as can be seen in such figures as Crocodile Dundee [Paul Hogan] or the heroic character of Drover [Hugh Jackman] in Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia*). Nonetheless, Coaldale does not assess the situation of Aboriginal peoples and turn around and go back to England, but rather commits himself to New South Wales and

stays until his death. No doubt enters his mind as to the enterprise of clearing land, constructing a house, running sheep, paying off the land, and occupying the place. Charitably, one can read between the lines that if he had left, this would only have opened the way for someone more violent and less conciliatory. The shady ways in which land was acquired and Aborigines murdered are also chronicled in the poem. In addition, one substantial subtext in the poem concerns Coaldale's eligibility, as young women's voices supply their own narrative of Coaldale's arrival, progress, and death. From initial interest in Coaldale, "quite good-looking in/a sunburned sort of way" (12), as well as being a man who has "conversation" (13), the women's voices modulate to restrained nervousness over the passing of time without Coaldale's choosing any of them, to resigned regret that he never married. As a settler who has no family, Coaldale becomes a vanishing invader, and in his desire to leave the land to local Aborigines, the act relates Aborigines to family, the normal recipients of legacies. Ultimately, of course, this is a history that never happened, and becomes instead an exploration of what might have happened had there been such a settler,¹ the suggestion being that in the nineteenth century there might have been no way to return land to its traditional guardians. Even dying off early, as Coaldale does, is no help.

On its first page it addresses the question of ownership, partly as Edward Coaldale tells his mother back in England that he hopes to own the land soon, and partly through the detail that "Koorinal is the name I'll keep" (9). "Keeping" the land's name may be seen as a sign of respect toward local Aborigines, but it can also be seen as a more comprehensive type of keeping, the word "keep" here, meaning primarily to retain, shadowed by its primary meaning of owning something oneself, thus denying it to others. Yet what appears to be a ripening tale of settler occupation and the establishment of a heritage is interrupted quite early in the poem by Coaldale's death from an internal ailment, the poem leaping forward to the present in the same district, and a family in which the two brothers are the farmer and the historian of the last section of *The Great Forgetting*.

Ray Whitby, the historian, is working to correct "The Great Forgetting", at least as far as local history is concerned, the battle lines drawn with his brother, for whom "[t]he murderers and murderees/are safely in their separate graves," and furthermore he believes that contemporary historiography, belying Mark McKenna's experience, has ensured that "this whole valley's covered now./You've got the massacres mapped out" (50). The poem is thus not simply a matter of telling an unknown story, given the vigorous current in Australian historiography that has enabled fuller and more accurate histories to circulate at many levels. It is rather attempting both to retell aspects of the now accepted version using some of the linguistic tools by which the old versions were told, as well as exploring the possibility of telling it in such a way that the poem itself becomes "a sign that history happened" (77). The section of *Freehold* in which this line occurs is a revised reprint of the last section of *The Great Forgetting*, but this line is one of the additions. It is not enough to occupy or rewrite the narrative of history, it must be memorialised, and memorials function differently to historical accounts. Accordingly, *Freehold* morphs into a tale of establishing a physical memorial to the murder of Aboriginal people on the Whitby farm, and wonders about the psychic mechanisms which would lead to such a memorial being erected, and then speculates upon the likely outcome in the longer run. As will be seen, there can be little confidence about the transmission of history through physical memorials. Just as in *Invisible Histories*

Coaldale's ancestor visits the farm to discover his grave, after a lot of difficulty: "a cracked and weathered single slab of granite, half-buried in the ground" (66), smothered in tough grasses and lantana, in *Freehold* the memorial erected to the murder of the Bundjalung family as recently as the iconic 1988 has paint that is "stained and rusty now/and several of the pointed palings/are badly out of line" (159). Less than twenty years later the new owner of the land "thinks it's more a Whitby thing/and nothing much to do with him" (159), and even the descendant of Toolbadgery's family does not know if the memorial is still there. In McKenna's words, "[r]ural Australia is still a frontier, a point of contact between indigenous Australians and the history of their resistance to those who took their land" (9), but for all of the energy expended in rewriting schoolbooks, history courses or scholarship, "popular understanding of [Aborigines'] traditional culture and their relationship with the land is restricted to a small minority" (16). It is against this background that Page's move from the postmodern fragments of *Invisible Histories* to the classic narrative yarn of *Freehold* might be seen. Rewriting the traditional stories of white occupation in as untraditional a form as in *Invisible Histories* belongs to the type of discourses that circulate among this small minority, although one must be somewhat sanguine about the chances of a verse novel, in however colloquial a rhythm, doing much better.

As is customary in Page's work, there is an absence of triumphalist closure in *Freehold*. In most revisionary histories it is explicit that the teller knows a story that earlier tellers did not, their stories being written over or cancelled not just through altering the details as through reading the same details in terms of changed priorities. Page's aim is not simply to erase earlier history, or to write over it, as to write within it, using its tools to articulate both rupture and continuity at the same time. And in the end, revised versions, and actions consequent upon that, are still at risk of what all stories are at risk of: being forgotten, getting lost in the long grass like the monuments to both the atrocities of settlers and to their achievements, "unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time" (Shakespeare, Sonnet 55). In terms of the arguments for and against such a monument discussed dramatically within the poem, it is clear that the moral logic of the work approves of its construction, without suggesting that history thereby becomes tidied up. Yet while it was a worthwhile monument to erect, in terms of the circulation of historical meanings there are things it cannot do: it cannot speak for itself if we are not in front of it, for example. Unless it is spoken for, its meanings are reduced, and may even shade towards the danger inherent in all monuments: becoming a monument to oblivion itself.

In William Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" (from which the title to this article comes), contained within *Lyrical Ballads*, the poem's speaker asks a little girl how many children there are in her family, to which she replies there are seven. After discovering that two of the children are dead and buried, the speaker tries hard to convince the little girl that there are only five children in the family, but he is unsuccessful. The speaker's lofty logic of the material makes no headway against the girl's perception that the dead are still part of the family, and ultimately Geoff Page would align himself with the little girl. Perhaps all history-telling would. But the desire to produce monuments that will not be quickly forgotten when immediate family members are not standing nearby to interpret them remains one that Geoff Page perceives in terms of the loss Dennis Haskell identified as a mark of his poetry. In the last lines "[t]he river seems to bear them all/in swirls towards the sea" (169). The blending of invaders' and Aborigines'

“sweat” (169) points toward the extinction that awaits us all, and might be seen to activate the suspicion Katharine Bode recently directed at Roger McDonald’s *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*, that it “institutes parity in the relationship of white and black men to Australian space” (93). Nevertheless, apart from the fact that it does not blend the blood of the two groups, Page’s melancholy ending recalls the relevance of Judith Wright’s conclusion of the first paragraph of her *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*: “The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures” (xi). By sweeping everyone out to sea, and reducing everyone’s figure to formless liquid, Page has not so much indicated parity as admitted the present impossibility of both peace with the landscape or the solid figuration of its human figures, at least for the white writer. Despite Page’s collaboration with Aboriginal artist Pooaraar in *The Great Forgetting*, and his ambition to bring differing stories into a useful confluence, the task of writing a healing history might be impossible for reasons that lie beyond the writer’s strategies or good-will. For Vicki Grieves what is needed is “an ability to understand that the solution to the perceived ‘Aboriginal problem’ to white society lies in our post-colonial sovereignty” (38), a solution that no history of the past can ever contain.

Note

1. The settler that provided some of the inspiration for Page’s tale, Edward Ogilvie, did marry, albeit a woman he met while on a visit to England, and he did not leave his land to the Bundjalung people. See George Farwell 1973.

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