

Review

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Sarah Maddison. *Beyond White Guilt: the real challenge for Black-White relations in Australia*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2011

The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do.

Sir William Deane, Governor-General of Australia, Inaugural Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture, August 1996

Australia's symbolic head of state, the Governor-General, is appointed by what many in Australia consider to be a 'foreign power' – the English Crown. The current sovereign of Australia, to use her correct title, is *Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God Queen of Australia and Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth*. This relationship symbolises better than any other, the tangible reality of Australia's enduring relationship with its past. While conservative scholars, media commentators and leaders of industry continue to urge Australians to look to the future, rather than the past for cultural and economic inspiration of what is possible in the 'Lucky Country', even the most optimistic gaze continues to be obscured by the legacies of British Dominion. Sarah Maddison, Associate Professor in School of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of New South Wales, confronts this problem in her new book *Beyond White Guilt*. She refers to it as Australia's 'long colonial shadow'.

Perhaps the most unforgiving of these legacies is the manifest suffering that Aboriginal people continue to endure. According to almost every social and economic indicator, Indigenous people in Australia occupy the epicentre of disadvantage. Infant mortality, educational achievement, employment, housing and health statistics describe a continuing situation in which, at every stage of life, Aborigines face problems that belie the citizenship they are supposed to enjoy as part of one of the world's most successful economies and advanced societies. This is chiefly due to the complete absence of any consultation or participation by Indigenous people in the development of the Australian Constitution, proclaimed in 1901. The ongoing plight of Aboriginal Australia was starkly exposed by the United Nations in 2010. The UN report *State of the World's Indigenous People* revealed that the life expectancy of Indigenous people in Australia is 20 years less than other Australians – putting Australia on par with Nepal and

significantly worse than its close neighbour New Zealand, where the difference in life expectancy is half that.

All of this constitutes a major social, political and existential crisis for the whole of Australia. It is impossible for Australians to ignore an issue so profound that it strikes at the very heart of the nation's identity. For Maddison, the result is a deep psychological state of collective guilt. This is not a sense of guilt that proceeds from direct participation in any crime. The author cites German writer and professor of law Bernhard Schlink on the consequences of a 'community of responsibility' that flows from continuing solidarity with the perpetrators of historical injustice. 'For as long as the options available for severing these bonds, such as restitutions or reparations, have not been taken up, then the solidarity – the collective guilt – exists by default' (26).

There have been a range of major initiatives undertaken by the Australian Government to provide recognition (a Federal referendum in 1967 included, for the first time, Aborigines in the census); restitution (limited Land Rights were granted in 1976); to investigate (a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was conducted nationally in 1991); to engage popular support for reform (a national Council for Reconciliation delivered an extensive report with recommendations to the Australian Parliament in 2000); and to generate change (the Australian Council of Australian Governments signed a National Indigenous Reform Agreement in 2008). Despite these, it remains difficult to be optimistic about the future well-being of Aboriginal Australians, as evidence of substantial change in the well-being and prospect of Aboriginal people is hard to find.

Maddison describes our situation starkly.

'With the exception of the 1967 referendum, none of these forms of engagement changed the institutional relationship between peoples. Wherever it seemed that progress was to be made, political will seemed to fail and the opportunity to make more profound change slipped away' (142).

Most key social and economic indicators continue to worsen and legal interventions such as the 1998 '10 Point Plan' to allow extinguishment of Native Title; and more recently a range of actions to impose welfare income management and compulsory acquisition of community land leases have been criticised as discriminatory and disempowering. Critics see these measures as actively reducing the ability of Aboriginal people to act with self-determination and serving only to increase confusion in the public mind about what is required to improve the situation. The message of *Beyond White Guilt* is that the Australian investment in policy and statute-led change has substantially failed. Maddison argues that ultimately, Australians must question the notions of whiteness and cultural connections to Britain that have provided 'certainty and stability' for non-Indigenous people, but have delivered little for Aborigines.

She expects that people will hate her book. 'They will feel angry and want to immediately deny that they share in the collective guilt that I diagnose.' Maddison's hope is that, so provoked, these readers will have created an opportunity to reflect on why they should feel this way. At the heart of the authors project is the idea of adaptive

change. This requires a challenge to question such things as our continuing reliance for national identity on narratives and mythologies that have served to oppress Aborigines. How? By re-engaging with 'the difficult conversation about memory and history' (154). Having been involved intimately with Australia's recent experience of the 'History War', I find it hard to feel assured that this is a going to be a straightforward challenge.

It is almost certain that many Australians will react defensively to this book's suggestion that acknowledgement of some sort of 'guilt' is a necessary part of reconciliation and healing. Many will retreat to the cultural foxhole in which those who have been ill-served by Australia's education system, driven to frustration and cynicism by naïve policy or inflamed by right wing media commentators tend to hide. My own experience of reconciliation and in supporting the development of Reconciliation Action Plans is that 'guilt' is a term that is best avoided. For most it conjures up the spectre of personal responsibility - of liability. And this is good reason for most who are troubled by race relations in Australia to become immediately risk-averse. I suspect that 'grief' and 'powerlessness' better describe how the majority of Australians feel when they ponder the continuing trauma of Aboriginal Australia. Either way, Sarah Maddison's call for better understanding of the nature of White Australian privilege and its role in perpetuating our current dilemmas must certainly be part of the solution.

'It is discomfoting to understand that one's group identity is dependent on another's exploitation, and the more this situation is perceived to be at odds with Australian values the more likely it is that people in the advantaged group will be supportive of change' (116)

Beyond White Guilt not only recognises, but offers an intelligent and reflective analysis of why both reconciliation and progress in reducing Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia have stalled. The book will present some awkward challenges to leaders of opinion, community and government because it challenges the very basis and questions the sustainability of Australia's identity as an ostensibly 'white' nation. Aboriginal people already know that for millennia Australia has had a nature, an identity, a history that exists with complete independence from British monarchy and European ideology. The challenge that Maddison puts out is for contemporary Australians to accept such a reality and to discover how essential this knowledge is for the future of the nation.

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