

# Bookending Australia's history

Andrew Hamilton | 11 July 2017



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**In manorial houses bookends were impressive in their own right, ready to bear the weight of expectation that was placed on their lords. The carvings, the shields and the embossing matched the conviction, embodied in the texts and documents housed between them, that this was no ordinary house, the history held between the bookends no ordinary history.**

Modern Australian history is bookended by the arrival of white settlers in which Indigenous Australians were expelled to the margins, and by the arrival of people seeking protection who were themselves expelled to the margins on Manus Island and Nauru.

Between these bookends lie the events, the people, the relationships, the enterprises and the experiences that compose the story of Australia. They include acts of courage and cowardice, wisdom and stupidity, selfishness and generosity, nobility and barbarism. There are incidents that evoke shame and others that arouse pride.

There is a history of sin and a history of grace, and both intermingle in the story of what has mattered to Australians over more than two centuries.

The bookends themselves, though, are a bit shonky: four-by-two off-cuts nailed together. Not ideal for supporting proudly the heft of the history that lies between them. They are flawed pillars that question the order and the seriousness of the history they hold together. They need fixing.

The arrival of the first fleet was a masterly feat of organisation and initiative, followed by all the hardships, hard work and muddle involved in building and sustaining a colony. But its foundations were the dispossession of the original inhabitants and the disruption of their lives and cultures.

The inevitable conflict of interest between the Indigenous original inhabitants and the newcomers was seasoned by great acts of generosity on both sides, but was resolved in favour of the colonisers' interests. Violent resistance was crushed with overwhelming force and virtual impunity.

Eventually Indigenous Australians won some protection at the cost of free movement on their ancestral lands and vulnerability to catastrophic policies based on racial ideology. The disproportionate number of incarcerated Indigenous Australians is an emblem of this history. This bookend is made of wormwood.

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We Australians are still coming to terms with the consequences of invasion, settlement and exclusion of Indigenous Australians. Among the descendants of the later arrivals is a will for reconciliation, but not if it costs. Indigenous Australians desire recognition that they are the original Australians, but insist that it must be accompanied by measures that give them an assured voice in shaping the policies, laws and administrative regulations that affect their lives.

The first bookend leaves a double inheritance of the readiness to do what it takes in order to secure interests without respect for people who are in the way, and an uneasiness in the presence of Indigenous Australians that the nation was built at such a cost to them and to their cultures.

The second bookend is the way in which we have dealt with people who have come to us seeking protection from persecution. It displays the same readiness to do what it takes to secure perceived interests, and to inflict suffering on some in order to deter others. No excess of cruelty, it has seemed, could sate the cry to be tough on asylum seekers. Manus Island is the emblem of this policy. Australians respond to it with the same ambivalence they feel before Indigenous people, alternating between satisfaction that governments are doing what it takes and occasional shame when the whips and scars of the policy are seen close up. This bookend is made from the wood of the upas tree.

These two bookends need fixing because both involve a policy designed to advantage one group by treating another group brutally. This has corrupted Australian society and has had fatal consequences both for the persons affected and for the majority group.

In the case of Indigenous Australians it left behind discriminatory regulations, denial of freedoms and mixed defensiveness and shame. In the case of people seeking protection it has left a legacy of depriving minority groups of the protection of law and a fractured sense of community. Left unaddressed these poisons can leach further into Australian society.

To address them will be difficult. The first thing is to attend to the story of our relationships to Indigenous Australians and to refugees, not seeking condemnation or exoneration, but giving weight particularly to the human experience of the people who were participants and affected in this history. This will lead to apology, to reflection on how to make amends, and to the evolution of policies and administration that respect the humanity of those in Australia before our boats arrived and those who came by boat afterwards to seek protection. Then will our history be decently bookended.

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