The Whole Truth...?
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Abstract

The term, 'the Black Armband view of history' has come into common usage in recent years. It has been taken up most strongly by those within the Australian community who perceive that the history of Australia is being re-written with undue attention being given to the negative aspects of European settlement, in particular the treatment of Australia's indigenous peoples. Others view these additions as an appropriate and necessary filling in of those parts of Australia's history that have been ignored or minimised in what has been described as 'the Great Australian Silence'.

Key words: Black Armband view of history; Great Australian Silence; Three Cheers view of history

In essence the relationship between the concept of the 'Great Australian Silence' and what has been dubbed the 'Black Armband' view of history revolves around the portrayal of a history and in particular the completeness of that history. The history is Australia's, and it is set in the context of the period since the European invasion and colonisation of Australia. The history of one place, but from many and widely varying perspectives. The nub of the relationship is linked to the debate about the 'correctness' of the differing views.

Until approximately the 1960s the history of Australia was essentially the story of British discovery, exploration, settlement and development of an 'empty' continent. It reflected the triumphs and tribulations of good men of Anglo-Saxon stock against a backdrop of an often harsh and cruel environment. Other players on this stage (in particular the Indigenous inhabitants but also women, children, non-British migrants) received scant recognition in the building up of the official record in this story of nation building. This non-inclusion was not due to lack of material but rather based on perception and choice (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 1994, p. 20). In no small part this is because much of that component of the story (particularly with regard to Indigenous Australians) is less than glorious and for much of it downright shameful, even allowing for the various worldviews of the time.

Henry Reynolds in the introduction to his book 'This Whispering in our Hearts' (1998, pp. ix-xvii) points out that concerns about the legitimacy and morality of the colonisation of Australia have been voiced since initial British contact with the continent. Unfortunately, until the last 30 years or so, they have been the voices and actions of a few and been dismissed, not included in any significant sense in the history books.

In 1968 the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner coined the term, the 'Great Australian Silence' (1979, p. 207), in his Boyer Lecture series titled 'After the Dreaming' (1979,
The notion he was conveying was of the incompleteness of Australia’s history. Whilst European endeavour since invasion was well documented and positive in tone, Australia’s Indigenous people were essentially unrepresented within that history. Stanner puts it that they were represented as but a "melancholy footnote" (1979, p. 214). Central to Stanner's argument is the notion that this non-inclusion, this leaving out of the Indigenous Australians from the nation's history, was not a matter of mere forgetfulness, but a "structural matter" (1979, p. 214). A deliberate process designed to exclude from the story building the "...several hundred thousand Aborigines who lived and died between 1788 and 1938...(who were but)...negative facts of history and, having being negative, were in no way consequential for the modern period" (1979, p. 214).

As Stanner wrote of the 'Great Australian Silence' he acknowledged (1979, p. 216) that there were historians already starting the hard work of filling in the gaps in Australia’s history books. They were starting to address those components that dealt with the history of Indigenous Australians, their interactions and relationships with the invading colonists. A strong school of historians has arisen since then and has worked diligently to broaden and give depth to what has become known as Aboriginal History (Attwood 1992, p. x). Others have also been at work addressing those other silences that enshrouded the histories of women and non-British elements in Australia's past.

For many non-indigenous Australians, particularly the groups in power (e.g. parts of government, big business and the church), the broadening of the nation's historical base and in particular the exposure and inclusion of less palatable episodes on which this nation has been built has not been particularly welcome. From many there has been resistance and a backlash. Henry Reynolds (1999, p. 243) notes that some of the more clamorous opponents accuse the writers of such histories of "...deliberately undermining national cohesion and self-confidence and making the young feel ashamed rather than proud of their past".

The labelling of and effectively the compartmentalising of Aboriginal, feminist and non-British histories as the 'Black Armband' view of history occurred in 1993. It was put forward in the 1993 Latham Lecture by the historian Geoffrey Blainey and subsequently published in Quadrant (1993, pp. 10-15). He put it that this 'Black Armband' view of history represented an opposite to what he calls the 'Three Cheers' view of history which saw Australia's history (apart from the convict era) as largely successful and something to be proud of (1993, p. 11). He set up the 'Black Armband' view of history as a damning by the "...multicultural folk..." of Australia's past treatment of "...Aborigines, of Chinese, of Kanakas, of non-British migrants, of women, the very old, the very young and the poor...sometimes legitimately, sometimes not" (1993, p. 11).

Blainey does not explain clearly what he intended the term 'Black Armband' to imply, but it is as Richard Hall (1998, p. 1) puts it a "...slogan... loaded with layers of meaning". My interpretation of it is that he has used it to imply a negative perspective rather than a sense of mourning, loss or respect as might be expected in a more traditional Western interpretation of the term. It can be seen as a 'branding' of a particular field of historical endeavour (within the broader field of Australian history) as somehow malevolent, bent on harm or shaming of the 'true' history. The intent of
such branding, perhaps, was to legitimise attacks upon such uncomfortable histories. Whilst acknowledging that the 'Three Cheers' view of history may have been "…too favourable, too self congratulatory..." Blainey (1993, p. 11) puts it that in some way the 'Black Armband' view of history might well represent a move to "…an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced."

Not long after his election in 1996, Prime Minister John Howard delivered the Sir Robert Menzies Lecture for that year and took up the notion of the 'Black Armband' view of history with gusto, "…repeating it like a mantra" according to Richard Hall (1998, p. 1). He warned against allowing history to be rewritten definitively by those "…who take a view that Australians should apologise for most of it" (Howard 1996). Others, many further to the political right, such as Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party took it up as well.

Much of what has been branded the 'Black Armband' view of history represents the filling in of what was hidden behind Stanner's 'Great Australian Silence'. This tussle with history that is the basis for this essay is not an isolated one. The revisiting, reinterpreting and rewriting of history goes on constantly. Sean Brawley (1999) points to similar debates in New Zealand, Japan, Israel, Germany and the Americas as just some examples.

Histories are generally written by the winners, those in control, with a view to reinforcing the legitimacy of their position and how they arrived at it. The writers of history rarely portray themselves (or their commissioners) in a bad light. It can be argued then that the inclusion of the so-called 'Black Armband' elements of Australia's history into the broader story of the nation represents a move away from that paradigm. It seeks to have the history of this country encompass the whole story, warts and all, and from a multiplicity of perspectives. Facing up to it and according it its place in our collective history is something that in the longer term can only benefit and empower both the individual and the nation. Brawley (1999) quotes Jeff Kennett (from his address to the Samuel Griffith Society in 1993) to good effect on the subject of our history:

"…From the good we gain pride; from the bad we learn; and from the totality of our past we gain our identity".

As a final note we can rest assured that however we might perceive and record our history at this moment in time, historians in the future will revisit, reinterpret and rewrite it to reflect their understanding of their past.

**References**


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