

History in Black and White: a critical analysis of the Black Armband debate

Anna Clark

In December 1998, a letter from B J Wright of Glenelg East, South Australia, was published in *Quadrant*, a conservative Australian literary journal. Wright complained that the recent widespread commemoration of Aboriginal history was endangering the country:

Sorry Day was nothing less than an emotion-driven exercise in Black-armbandism for the moral uplift of middle class non-natives. The result of all this may well be the unintended adoption of very opposite attitudes by the manipulable young.¹

'Black armband' history came to define a growing reappraisal of Australia's past, demonstrated through public remembrances like Sorry Day. It was a label of derision, a blanket term designed to dismiss increasingly critical approaches to Australian history as unnecessarily bleak and overly 'emotional'. This 'black armband' tag was a strategic conservative swipe at histories that revealed Australia's past as racist and violent. Its application served to present critical history as unbalanced, a misrepresentation of our national heritage. Such a view held that, in spite of its historical 'blemishes', to deny Australia its rightful national story was at best recklessly naïve, at worst unAustralian.

Critical Australian histories had long provoked significant conservative disapproval.² In 1984, Geoffrey Blainey's Warrnambool speech sparked a national controversy and debate. Directed at Australian immigration policy, he questioned whether multiculturalism, and in particular Asian immigration, was in the national interest.³ As the debate wore on, however, it became clear that his comments were part of a wider appraisal of contemporary Australian society, identity and history:

Attempts to depict Australian history as mainly a story of exploitation, of racial violence, of oppressions and conflict have a measure of truth, but contain a larger measure of untruth.⁴

Ten years later, Blainey introduced a vivid mark of bereavement to illustrate the apparent emotional darkness of this writing.⁵ Such history was 'black armband', he said. It reacted against the Australian achievement with a dark mourning of the nation.

Black armbands are signs of sympathy and respect. Socially, they have constituted public demonstrations of conventional sorrow, and they are strong symbols in the ritual of mourning. Footballers have worn them for years, loyally venerating a dead ex-player, family member or Club associate. The football analogy may have rung strong for Blainey, a respected historian of Australian Rules, when he used this image as a populist metaphor for an apparent revisionist bereavement.⁶ Black armbands have also constituted powerful political images of grief. Aboriginal activists wore them in the 1970s as signs of mourning and resistance. The imagery of the black armband plays a significant symbolic part of

protest. Mark McKenna has astutely pointed out that by appropriating the black armband, Blainey twisted its political origins of often radical dissent to a pejorative catch-all for revisionist history.⁷

By injecting the black armband into the debate, Blainey gave this discussion a persuasive metaphor and new impetus. Since his original 1993 usage, the black armband debate has ranged widely, its momentum increasing as commentators entered the ensuing discussion. The debate has culminated with the assertion that not only are critical readings of the past coloured or biased, they have been integral to a sustained left-wing programme of negativity and misinformation. In 2000, historian Keith Windschuttle's series of articles published in *Quadrant* claimed that the Australian public had been deliberately misled by 'a major academic deception'.⁸

Over the past twenty years, Australian historians have conducted a story of widespread massacres on the frontier of the expanding pastoral industry ... However, when it is closely examined, the evidence of these claims turns out to be highly suspect.⁹

His arguments have fuelled the latest instalment of this continuing historical disagreement.

This is a debate, however, with profound limitations. First, the conservative obsession with balance reveals its own polemical strategy. Blainey initiated the metaphor of the 'balance sheet' to portray revisionist history as lop-sided and extreme.¹⁰ 'Balance' was presented as an historical compromise between competing claims to the past, but it is the 'balance sheet' that forms the critique of critical history today. And it is this dichotomy, between 'balance' and 'black armband' that has resolved the terms of the debate. The conservative rejection of revision has been a political manoeuvre, deflecting the substantial consequences that critical histories have brought to light: public policies of child removal are downplayed as 'historical blemishes',¹¹ the claims of the stolen generations refuted for being statistically insignificant.¹² For this is black armband history, its critics claim, a history weighed down and weakened by its emotional engagement with the past.

Moreover, the conservative arguments against black armband history have altered the view that the Australian historical establishment lies within traditional narratives of progress and democracy. Critical histories sought to question many established assumptions about Australia's past. Not only has their challenge been dismissed as extreme by conservatives, it has been rejected for its supposed domination of contemporary historical discussion. With the twist of a metaphor, the nascent perception that Australian history was under the hold of a domineering left-wing academic influence was vitally illustrated: the vocal minority was in control; the mainstream was under threat. B J Wright's intervention and Windschuttle's vociferous campaign reflected the shift in interpretation away from radical history as a challenge to Blainey's suggestion it had come to constitute an orthodoxy.¹³

The growing acceptance of 'black armband' as a term for historical revision has implications beyond the immediate scope of the debate itself. To imply that revision is inherently critical or biased is to misunderstand the way the past is continually re-evaluated. Revisionist challenges to understandings of the past

should not be misinterpreted as ‘opposition’, but the discourse of ‘black armbandism’ has established a framework where readings of Australian history are positioned diametrically. It is not just conservative historians and politicians who have adopted Blainey’s black armband imagery. Progressives have attempted to refute criticisms of revisionist history while accepting the terms Blainey proposed. They too are trapped within the narrow scope of a debate that sidelines complexity. By constituting historiographical movement as simple and reactive, the black armband debate fails to encompass an ongoing process. By framing history writing as a set of opposites, rather than a series of encounters with the past, the debate overlooks the interpretive aspects of reading the past; it fails to comprehend the nature of revision as potentially expansive. Those who engage in the debate are ultimately limited by its explicit parameters of division.

Capturing the mainstream

In his 1993 Latham Lecture, Blainey emphasised that the main culprits of the black armband view were the historians themselves. Mentioning the ‘gloomy’ historical vision of Manning Clark, Blainey went on to add that some recent books by historians were also propounding a bleak interpretation of history and even ‘schoolchildren are often the target for these views’.¹⁴ The popular commentator Gerard Henderson agreed, and argued similarly that:

Australians are variously portrayed as racist, sexist, materialist and with very little culture ... This is alienated history at its worst. On any balanced analysis, Australia has been a remarkably successful nation.¹⁵

Henderson had also blamed Clark for popularising this ‘alienated’ view of the past. He accused historians like Clark, as well as art and social critic Robert Hughes and the ‘radical’ John Pilger, of denigrating Australian history:¹⁶

so much of our history is taught by the alienated and discontented. Australia deserves better ... It is time to junk guilt and alienation. Down with the falsification of Australian history.¹⁷

Blainey and Henderson imply that ‘our history’ embodies the real Australian narrative. This notional single story is used to distinguish a common Australian experience that constitutes the identity of ‘mainstream Australia’.

Writing for *Quadrant* in 1992, the freelance historian Robert Murray exclaimed that historical revision was seeping ‘into general public ideas about the past’, and endangering the national narrative.¹⁸

Wildly inaccurate clichés, usually seeking consciously or unconsciously to discredit the Australian past, have now become so commonplace that they threaten to rewrite the national story in the public mind.¹⁹

By 1997, Blainey concluded, while many historians preached the black armband view, it had become more emphatic outside the history books. The recent historical swing, he asserted, had ‘run wild’ and was ‘noticeable on the TV news, ABC radio, and the highbrow dailies’.²⁰

The apparent risk critical history posed to the ‘mainstream’ propelled this growing conservative anxiety. The belief that a dangerous revisionism was

descending over the nation was widespread. Like red communist arrows advancing across 1950s maps of Asia, an insidious ideological threat was seeping into homes throughout Australia via newspapers, television and even school texts. black armband history was harmful, wrong and increasingly prominent.

A number of factors contributed to the impression of a widening black armband lens. Native title and *Bringing them home*, the report into the stolen generations, were premised upon understandings of Australia as historically and institutionally inequitable. Mateship and equality, central tenets of the 'achievement' story, are difficult to reconcile with racism and dispossession. The debates about invasion and racism that inevitably flowed on from these developments were played out again in discussions over history syllabuses in schools and in public fora.

The *Native Title Act* of 1992 prompted a large conservative backlash. Refuting the historical untruth of *terra nullius*, the High Court's decision was judicial recognition of a continuous history of European colonisation and Aboriginal deprivation. The judgements of Justices Deane and Gaudron determined that dispossession had left a 'national legacy of unutterable shame'.²¹ Revisionist histories were used by the High Court to challenge the narrative myths of Australian settlement and progress. Blainey reacted fiercely, attacking the High Court Judges ('gripped by their black armbands') for advocating a divided Australia.²² 'It perpetuates a new form of racial discrimination', he said, 'a nation wide form of land tenure based on race'.²³ His response to land rights had not always been so dismissive. In August 1979 the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, chaired by Nugget Coombs, published an ad in the *National Times*. Appealing for a Treaty with Aboriginal people, the full page spread was signed by a number of prominent figures from across the political spectrum, including Geoffrey Blainey.²⁴ How times change. Seventeen years later he was accusing the new legislation of reverse racism. Yet Blainey's response to *Mabo* missed the founding legal principle of native title, which was the inclusive effort to recognise and accommodate Indigenous forms of land tenure. His blind assumption that *Mabo* was a nationally divisive judicial imposition ignored the import of this initial legal reception of Aboriginal ownership.

Others also defensively rejected the historical implication of the *Mabo* decisions. Ray Groom, the Liberal Premier of Tasmania, reacted with strong denials to State Parliament, saying that there was never any genocide in Tasmania. He accused the Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, of being 'hell-bent' on using the *Mabo* decision to rewrite Australian history. The federal leader of the National Party, Tim Fischer, claimed that *Mabo* had been 'hijacked' by 'politically-correct agenda setters'.²⁵

Much of *Mabo*'s significance lay in the way it registered a wider reconceptualisation of Australian history. The grave problems of colonisation were discussed widely in the media. And the anxiety such problems provoked was particularly visible in the growing controversy over teaching history in schools. In February 1994, a new school text in Queensland suggested teachers use 'invasion' rather than 'settlement'. It also maintained that the use of 'explorer', 'pioneer' and 'discoverer' were unsuitable because they implied Australia was uninhabited before colonisation. Queensland Labor Premier, Wayne Goss declared that the 'politically correct' references in the new Year 5 Social Studies textbook went too far.

I think just about all Australians would not regard what happened in 1788 as an invasion. There is a world of difference between the arrival of the First Fleet and what most people understand as an invasion.²⁶

In a letter to Carole Ferrier at the University of Queensland, Goss contended that his own position was informed by a concern to teach ‘the facts’:

if they teach students the facts then those students can make up their own mind as to whether they regard the events of 1788 as an invasion or settlement.²⁷

Goss’s division of ‘invasion’ and ‘settlement’ reproduced the historical bipolarity implied by the black armband metaphor. Moreover, his demand for ‘the facts’ ignored the premise of the Queensland text, which was an endeavour to encompass and analyse different historical perspectives of European colonisation.

Later that year, the Liberal Minister for Education in New South Wales, Virginia Chadwick, was similarly condemned at the National Party State Conference for allowing the word ‘invasion’ to be included in the new primary social studies syllabus in place of ‘settlement’.²⁸ A delegate who initiated the motion said there was no need to change the way that Australian children had been learning for two hundred years:²⁹

The wording as is — settlement instead of invasion — portrays the idea white man came into Australia and settled without the idea of invading the country.³⁰

The draft was consequently toned down. ‘Invasion’ was removed from some sections of the syllabus and replaced by more neutral terms, such as ‘arrival of British people’ and ‘before 1788’.³¹ In response, the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation threatened to ban the syllabus.

Then in Opposition, John Howard accused the Federation of attempting to distort the past to make a ‘contemporary political point’. Its members were guilty of ‘ideologically driven intellectual thuggery’.³² ‘The description “invasion”’, he later maintained, ‘should never have been in the syllabus in the first place’.³³ The word ‘invasion’ challenged the legitimacy of Australia’s foundation. Recognition of that illegitimacy in history syllabuses extended the concern about changing approaches to Australian history into the realm of public education. Speaking with the populist talkback radio host John Laws after his election in 1996, Howard denounced the ‘black armband curriculum’:

To tell children whose parents were not part of that treatment, to tell children who themselves have been no part of it, that we’re all part of it, that we’re part of a sort of racist and bigoted history is something that Australians reject.³⁴

Howard’s concern with teaching paralleled public comments by educationists who also maintained that current syllabuses were overly negative. Patrick O’Farrell, Professor of History at the University of New South Wales, was adamant that the guilt school of Australian history teaching had gone too far. History education, he felt, had ‘fallen on evil times, both in schools and universities’.³⁵ Kevin Donnelly was the prominent Director of Education Strategies, a Melbourne-based consulting group that prospered during the Liberal Kennett Government in Victoria. Speaking at a forum on ‘Black Armband History’ in 1997, Donnelly focused on the teaching of history in Victorian schools, and argued adamantly that revisionist historians were a bad influence on the education system.

Instead of trying to understand past events by placing them in their historical context, these historians take the moral high ground. They interpret the past in light of what is now considered to be politically correct; especially in terms of 'gender, ethnicity and class'.³⁶

Again, the idea of 'balance' implicitly returns as critical history is condemned as corrupted by contemporary interests. Education critics insist the new history curricula contain an insular political bias. Like Blainey, they accuse the black armband historians of judging the past rather than providing a balanced account of it.

At the end of 1992, the year of the High Court's *Mabo* decision, Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating gave his now famous 'Redfern Park Speech'. Lamenting the European destruction of Aboriginal life, Keating turned to the need for reconciliation. Guilt was not a constructive emotion, he said. Rather, we need to 'open our hearts a bit. All of us'.³⁷ Keating's push for reconciliation reflected his opinion that Australia's destiny had always been shaped by Labor.³⁸

In response to Keating's sentimental inclusiveness, Howard sought to capitalise on the increasing public anxiety about Australian history aroused by the issues of native title and discord over 'invasion'. By 1996, he was campaigning with the election slogan 'For All of Us'. Like 'mainstream Australia', Howard's 'All of Us' invoked a collective Australian identity. It also became an astute conservative slogan that played off racial disharmony for political gain; as Noel Pearson contended, it implied an Australia 'For All of Us (but not them)'.³⁹ Howard had completed shrewd linguistic adjustment, a shift of imagery, where 'all of us' was manipulated from an illustration of reconciliation to division.

The hysterical nationalism of Pauline Hanson's foray into Federal Parliament also utilised this rhetoric of double meaning. 'One Nation' was a programme initiated by Keating's Labor government in 1992 to foster greater inclusiveness.⁴⁰ In 1996, Hanson's One Nation Party was demonising anyone who had the temerity to challenge a mythological 'mainstream' by being different. Hanson had lost Liberal pre-selection leading up to the 1996 election for making anti-Aboriginal statements. But after she won the seat of Ipswich and formed One Nation, Howard refused to condemn her.

While the Prime Minister defended Hanson's right to 'free speech', he continued to combat what he saw as a left-wing monopoly of Australian history. Keating's strong insistence that labour ideals had won a great historical victory over stifling conservatism irked Howard. Labor's 'propaganda' and 'revisionist history', he argued, was allowing the past to serve Labor's cause.⁴¹

One of the more insidious developments in Australian political life over the past decade or so has been the attempt to re-write Australian history in the service of a partisan political cause.⁴²

The Liberal Party, he maintained, needed to reject the 'attempted re-writing of Australian political history by our political opponents'.⁴³ But as Tony Birch has argued, Howard's finger pointing at perceived historical bias revealed his own political motivation against progressive influences in Australia: 'black armband' was utilised as populist rhetoric alongside 'guilt industry' and 'Aboriginal industry'.⁴⁴

In 1997, the report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was published and tabled in Federal Parliament.⁴⁵ The Federal government refused to apologise to the stolen generations:

the government does not support an official national apology. Such an apology could imply that present generations are in some way responsible and accountable for the actions of earlier generations, actions that were sanctioned by the laws of the time, and that were believed to be in the best interests of the children involved.⁴⁶

The refusal to apologise was caught up in the quest for 'balance' against guilt-ridden and overly emotional history, and this obsession with objectivity was revisited in early 2000. A government submission to the Senate inquiry on compensation for children forcibly removed dismissed the term 'stolen generation' as inaccurate:

The government is concerned that there is no reliable basis for what appears to be a generally accepted conclusion as to the supposed dimensions of the 'stolen generation' ... At most, it might be inferred that up to 10% of children were separated for a variety of reasons, both protective and otherwise, some forcibly and some not. This does not constitute a 'generation' of 'stolen' children. The phrase 'stolen generation' is rhetorical.⁴⁷

Refusal to apologise to Aboriginal people over forced child separation was maintained in spite of prolonged attempts to elicit an apology for Japanese wartime atrocities.⁴⁸ Ten years earlier, Blainey had castigated Prime Minister Bob Hawke for flying the Australian flag on Parliament House at half-mast when Hirohito had died, because the Japanese Emperor was a war criminal.⁴⁹ And only three weeks after the Government submission had denied the 'stolen generation', Howard was praising the 'remarkable legacy' of that 'great-hearted generation', the Anzacs.⁵⁰ Ostensibly, the exact figures of child removal were hard to establish. Apparently, it was impossible to offer a formal apology because there was no historical continuity between the actions of those in the past with the present. Yet less than ten per cent of the Australian population enlisted in the first world war,⁵¹ and Howard commended the inheritance we claim from the Anzacs today.

we claim from them a heritage of personal courage and initiative ... We come to join with those that rest here in a shared love of our nation.⁵²

Howard affirmed a white Anzac inheritance only weeks after denying a black one. Aiming to white out the 'black spots' in Australia's history, the Prime Minister's rhetoric of unity masked his politics of division.

The notion of a cohesive 'mainstream' concealed tactics that capitalise on social anxieties. This type of political strategy is framed by what Mark Davis has called the 'power of divisiveness'.⁵³ Davis analysed 'wedge politics' as a calculated political manoeuvre: 'All of Us' are united in rhetoric but remain divided by the false poles of this national debate. On one level 'mainstream Australia' reflected this falsehood, and merely reproduced the simplicity upon which the black armband discussion was founded. 'Mainstream Australia' was a vague national identity, an abstract collective whose dimensions were never established. Yet the 'mainstream' was also a political invention which emphasised divisiveness. In this sense, the black armband debate represented an astute conservative grab for control.

Reconstructing 'Black Armband'

Some historians have accepted Blainey's terminology and proudly embraced critical history as 'Black Armband' in an attempt to deflect the slogan away from its target of revision. The tragic nature of our past requires black armbands, such historians hold; those who ignore it are wearing 'white blindfolds'. But there remain problems with this approach. Embracing the notion of 'Black Armband' history perpetuates the dichotomy of historical approaches established by the debate. Direct engagement with conservative critics has rightly questioned the motives behind the construction and manipulation of 'Black Armband'. But by connecting with a simple historical framework, this embrace remains an inadequate response to the complexity which arises from differing interpretations of the past.

Speaking at a debate at the University of Melbourne in favour of the proposition that 'Australia's historians should wear black armbands', Janet McCalman argued we need to be more responsive to the terrible aspects of our past which have been ignored for too long.⁵⁴ Highlighting the often-hideous narrowness of denying Australia's colonial legacy, McCalman looked at the historian's duty to uncover this painful past.

There is no way that we can pretend that white Australia does not have a black history. The achievements of white Australia were considerable and deserve their own rich history. But all those achievements were only possible because we took a land that belonged to another people; we pushed them aside; we supplanted them; and subsequently we murdered them, poisoned them, infected them, disinherited them, put them in chains, and attempted even to dehumanise them.⁵⁵

McCalman's position pointed to the necessity for an encompassing history, for a recognition of the past as overwhelming and ever present. Perhaps it is unfair to criticise her in the context of the simplistic and negative parameters that framed the conservative instigation of 'Black Armband'. For it is true: we cannot pretend that Australia does not have a black history. But unlike McCalman, I am not sure that we have 'no honest alternative' than to wear black armbands.⁵⁶ Promoting 'Black Armband' history accepts the simple divisions established by the larger debate. Wearing a black armband is more complicated than showing historical empathy and respect. Accepting the metaphor strengthens the imagery of black and white historical approaches, playing into the conservative dismissal of revision.

Robert Manne also spoke in the Melbourne debate in favour of 'Black Armband' history. Admitting a negative view of the Australian past could at times be taken too far, he nevertheless argued that its recognition was crucial. If we did not study the terrible history of race relations in Australia, he said, invoking W E H Stanner, it would forever remain a 'melancholy footnote' in the margins of our history.⁵⁷

Manne's position on Australian history has been seminal. As editor of the conservative *Quadrant* magazine in the 1990s, he moved after the 1996 ballot from an editorial stance opposing revisionist history and political correctness to a repudiation of the Howard government's approach to the history of race relations.⁵⁸ Howard's election, Manne had originally commented, was a positive

move away from an uncertain, dynamic future and a return to the security of the past.⁵⁹ Yet within four months, he was arguing that Howard was being 'depressingly dispirited' with regard to Aboriginal issues.⁶⁰

Manne embraced much of the history that was coming to light with the report on the stolen generations, *Bringing them home*, and loudly criticised conservatives who failed to appreciate its historical significance:

Many conservatives in this country still have a moral blindspot about the dispossession of the Aborigines and its meaning.⁶¹

The denigration of this history by conservatives jeopardised what Manne felt to be its great worth: reconciliation. Failure to reconcile with the past is limiting. 'Australian historians should indeed wear black armbands', he declared.⁶²

Henry Reynolds, perhaps Australia's best-known critical historian, has also sought to challenge the conservative critique by positing revision within the existing structures of the Black Armband debate.

Black-armband history is often distressing, but it does enable us to understand the incubus which burdens us all.⁶³

Reynolds' work offers valuable insight into the history of race relations in Australia. He has written much to change the perception of Australian history, acknowledging the implicit exclusion of Aboriginal people from its narrative.⁶⁴ But by accepting the narrow, polarised scope of the Black Armband debate, he in effect endorsed it as a legitimate rationalisation of approaches to the past.

Other historians have also attempted to shift the conservative attack upon revisionist history. Rather than reproducing Blainey's definition of revisionist history as 'Black Armband', they have moved further, attempting to reveal what 'Black Armband' really means. Stephen Muecke has contended that 'all the most memorable national historical events are "black armband" events'. 'However', he suggested, 'the critics of the "black armband view" want to be selective about whose dead should be honoured in this kind of way'.⁶⁵ Muecke, an influential cultural critic, has written incisive postmodern analysis about the contextual differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural frameworks. His work has included important inquiries into the difficulty of writing about race relations from the context of a western academic tradition.⁶⁶

Muecke's entrance into the Black Armband debate was also a study of language and narrative. He argued that commemorating the dead was a legitimate part of national identity. But he was adamant that by associating 'Black Armband' history with guilt, its 'critics' missed the point about what black armbands represent as symbols of veneration, and as a means of inserting Aboriginal experience into the Australian narrative.

There is nothing morbid about these investments in the dead. To use another cliché, they 'strengthen national character'. More importantly, the black armband, like the one I have worn for my own relatives and friends, has nothing to do with guilt.⁶⁷

By using the existing ideas and rhetoric of the Black Armband debate, Muecke quite consciously attempted to reclaim or redirect the discourse away from its conservative origin.

In an article for the left-wing *Arena Magazine*, Rachel Buchanan and Paul James, like Muecke, criticised the fact that the only acceptable 'Black Armband' history is a romantic commemoration of Australia at war.

Australia is currently building up a very selective form of remembering where a black-armband view can only be developed in one area by a narrow take on the past – a new romanticising of our military history ... The myth still masks such issues as rape in war, the betrayal of our war-time ally East Timor, and the wars of 'settlement' on our own soil when colonisation of the Aboriginal peoples of this country allowed for the original 'forging of a nation'.⁶⁸

Buchanan and James uncovered the hypocrisy of the conservative employment of the Black Armband slogan by looking at our 'Black Armband' veneration of the mythological Anzac (the mate, the digger, the Unknown Soldier). Why is it, they asked, that only revisionist history is labelled 'Black Armband', and is not allowed to commemorate? Only by bringing out the true meaning of the black armband — commemoration and veneration, not unnecessary guilt — would enable Australians to come to terms with their past.

The reclamation of 'Black Armband' has also been attempted as an ironic parody of the narrowness of conservative attacks upon revisionist history. (Geoffrey Blainey and John Howard have been the main targets here, but the likes of Kevin Donnelly and Paul Sheehan are equally susceptible to this leftist inflection.) 'This week', began former La Trobe historian, Tony Barta, in an article for the *Age*, 'I have been wearing a black armband. It has always seemed an appropriate thing for a historian of the Australian past — and present — to do'.⁶⁹ Neglecting our 'Black Armband' past, argued Barta, is both morally indefensible and bad history.

Speaking at another seminar held by Melbourne University, Tony Birch described Blainey and Howard's claims to historical objectivity and balance as weightless, their criticisms of 'Black Armband' blinded by their own 'white veils'.⁷⁰ The term 'white blindfold' has also been used tactically to describe conservative criticisms of revisionist history.⁷¹ Like reclaiming 'Black Armband', the use of 'White Blindfold' is a rhetorical device, aimed at wresting control away from conservatives in the debate.

In these ways, 'Black Armband' has been reappropriated. No longer a pejorative label, for some it is once more a symbol of veneration. 'white blindfold' is also a clever twist of the debate's language. But there are problems in remaining within the parameters of the Black Armband discussion. Its narrow approach to history is perpetuated. The complexity of differing approaches to the past is reduced. Criticisms of revisionist history have been challenged by appropriating, dissecting or inflecting the conservative rhetoric. Yet such moves have remained bound by a debate which is a simplification of historical process.

Rejecting the slogan 'Black Armband' makes it possible to tease out a more subtle investigation of what revision means. In contesting the simplicity of the Black Armband dichotomy, a more complex evocation of history becomes apparent. Revisionist history is not a reaction, as Don Watson has argued, 'but an attempt to find a deeper contemporary meaning in the past'.⁷² The bipolarity of Black Armband discourse reifies historical revision. In doing so, the real meaning of revision is paradoxically erased. As a process, revision is not concerned to

delete past interpretations, but to add to them. And the abject failure of the debate to properly accommodate history as inherently revisionist reveals its own narrow conception of historical interpretation.

Arguments against the conservative core of this debate must avoid such simplification. The key here is a more nuanced and discerning approach to the past, where complexity and contradiction can be seen to broaden the possibility of historical approaches rather than hindering their comprehension. The history implied by the Black Armband debate is about contrast rather than complexity; understandings of revision as expansive are reduced by the debate's simple slogans of division.

History in Black and White: a critical analysis of the Black Armband debate
Anna Clark

- 1 B J Wright, 'Black-armbandism ascendant', letter to *Quadrant*, December 1998, p 5.
- 2 See for instance: Ken Baker, 'The Bicentenary: celebration or apology?', *IPA Review*, Summer 1985, pp 175-82; Leonie Kramer, 'The rocky horror history of Australia', *IPA Review*, Summer 1985, pp 183-5; John Hirst, 'The blackening of our past', *IPA Review*, December-February 1988/89, pp 49-54; Hugh Morgan, 'The guilt industry', *IPA Review*, May-July 1988, pp 17-20; and John Carroll, 'C E W Bean and 1988', *Quadrant*, June 1988, pp 47-9.
- 3 An excerpt of Blainey's Warrnambool speech is published in Geoffrey Blainey, *All for Australia*, Methuen Haynes, Nth Ryde, 1984.
- 4 Blainey, op cit, p 159. See also the response to Blainey's comments: Andrew Markus and MC Ricklefs [eds], *Surrender Australia? Essays in the study and uses of history: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian immigration*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985.
- 5 Blainey, 'Drawing up a balance sheet of our history', *Quadrant*, July-August 1993, pp 11-15.
- 6 See Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1990.
- 7 Mark McKenna, 'Metaphors of light and darkness: The politics of 'Black armband' history', *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, vol 25, 1998, pp 71-2.
- 8 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 2000.
- 9 Keith Windschuttle, 'The Myths of Frontier Massacres in Australian History (Part I)', *Quadrant*, October 2000, p 9. See also Parts II and III (*Quadrant* November & December 2000).
- 10 Blainey, 'Drawing up a balance sheet', p 11.
- 11 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April, 2000. See also John Howard, *Weekly House Hansard*, October 30, 1996, pp 6,158, where Howard reflects that, 'like any other nation, we have black marks upon our history but amongst the nations of the world we have a remarkably positive history'.
- 12 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 2000.
- 13 See also comments by P P McGuinness such as in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 2000, where he contended that critical discussion about massacres in Australian history was nothing more than exaggerated propaganda.
- 14 Blainey, 'Drawing up a balance sheet', op cit, p 11.
- 15 Gerard Henderson, 'Rewriting our history', *The Bulletin*, 19 January 12 February 1993, pp 26-7.
- 16 See Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Harvill, London, 1987; and John Pilger, *A Secret Country*, Cape, London, 1989. Their writing, emphasising the brutality of Australia's past, is Henderson's main target here.
- 17 Henderson, op cit, p 29.
- 18 Robert Murray, 'Seven myths about Australia', *Quadrant*, May 1992, p 40.
- 19 *ibid*.
- 20 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Black future', *The Bulletin*, 8 April 1997, p 22. (Also published as 'Mabo, Wik: a victory for racial discrimination', *News Weekly*, 17 May 1997.)
- 21 cit Raymond Gaita, 'Mabo: Part one', *Quadrant*, September 1993, pp 36-9.
- 22 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Black future', op cit, p 23.
- 23 *Sun Herald*, 2 March 1997.
- 24 *National Times*, 25 August 1979.
- 25 cit Pat Cavanagh, 'Australian history: a new understanding', Rhonda Craven (ed), *Teaching Aboriginal Studies*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, pp 160-1.
- 26 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1994.
- 27 Jennifer Craik, "'Was this an Invasion?': Framing History in the Media', Ray Land (ed), *Invasion and After: A Case Study in Curriculum Politics*, Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University, 1994, p 51.
- 28 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 June 1994.
- 29 *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June 1994.
- 30 *ibid*.
- 31 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1994. See also Alan Barcan, 'History in decay', *Quadrant*, July 1999, pp 45-56. Analysing the language of History syllabuses, such as the use of 'invasion', provides a valuable insight into how history teaching is defined in terms of wider social discussions like the Black Armband debate: *History Syllabus Years 7-10*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney, 1992; *Modern History Syllabus*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney, 1994; *History Stages*

- 4-5 Syllabus, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney, 1998; *Modern History Stage 6 Syllabus*, Board of Studies NSW, Sydney, 1999.
- 32 cit Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth about our History*, Ringwood, Vic, Viking, 1999, p 160.
- 33 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 June 1995.
- 34 *Age*, 8 November 1996.
- 35 *Canberra Times*, 11 March 1997.
- 36 Kevin Donnelly, 'The Black Armband view of Australian history' (Lecture to the Australian Centre's *Australia Forum on Black Armband History*, 12 March 1997), *Agora*, vol 32, no 2, 1997, p 14.
- 37 Keating, 'The Redfern Park speech', Sydney, 10 December 1992, Mark Ryan (ed), *Advancing Australia: The Speeches of Paul Keating, Prime Minister*, Big Picture Publications, Sydney, 1995, p 228.
- 38 See Paul Keating's 1993 Evatt Lecture, 'Starting the process', in Ryan op cit, where he asserted that 'Labor's story has always been very much Australia's story', and that the labour movement itself is 'bound by the common goal of social improvement and the realisation of national aspirations', pp 153-4.
- 39 *Australian*, 22 November 1996; Raymond Gaita, 'Not right', *Quadrant*, January-February 1997, p 46.
- 40 Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Melbourne, 1999, pp 254-5.
- 41 John Howard, 'Some thoughts on Liberal Party philosophy in the 1990s', *Quadrant*, July-August 1994, p 21.
- 42 John Howard, *Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture*, Adelaide Town Hall, 5 July 1996.
- 43 John Howard, *1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture*, 18 November 1996: <http://www.nla.gov.au/pmc/pressrel/menzies.htm>. Accessed 17 March 1997.
- 44 Tony Birch, "'Black Armbands and White Veils": John Howard's moral amnesia', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol 25, December 1996, p 8.
- 45 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, *Bringing them home: report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997.
- 46 John Herron (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs) to Father Frank Brennan, cited in Robert Manne, 'The Stolen Generations', *Quadrant*, January-February 1998, p 5. A year earlier, Herron had made similar comments in the *Joe and Dame Enid Lyons Memorial Lecture*, Australian National University, University House, Canberra, 15 November 1996.
- 47 John Herron, 'A generation was not stolen' (Federal Government's submission to the Senate inquiry), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 2000.
- 48 Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, NSW, 2000, p 8. Don Watson's (unpublished) speech at the Australian Centre's *Australia Forum on Black Armband History* on 12 March 1997 at the University of Melbourne also made reference to this international anomaly: 'It may help encapsulate the difficulty I have with the black-armbands people if I pose a question. And I may as well pose it to John Howard. In keeping with those concerns he raised in the Menzies Lecture, will he advise the Japanese Government that Australia no longer believes that Japan should accept responsibility for crimes committed during World War II?'
- 49 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Mourning the death of Emperor Hirohito', *Weekend Australian*, 25-6 February 1989, Geoffrey Blainey, *Blainey, eye on Australia: speeches and essays of Geoffrey Blainey*, Schwartz & Wilkinson, Melbourne, c1991, pp 176-7.
- 50 John Howard, 'Pilgrimage to define the future of a nation' (speech made at Gallipoli service, 25 April 2000), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 2000.
- 51 Richard Nile, 'Wars of words', Richard Nile (ed), *The Australian Legend and its Discontents*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 2000, p 184.
- 52 Howard, 'Pilgrimage to define the future of a nation'.
- 53 Mark Davis, *Ganglands* [2nd ed], Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1999, pp 302-3. See also Leigh Dale, 'Mainstreaming Australia', Nile (ed), op cit, p 311, who argues that at the heart of this strategy is 'a rhetoric of trauma and division'. Locating cultural difference as the source of national problems, it is based thoroughly on an abstract 'mainstream'.

- 54 'The Inaugural Melbourne Debate' was printed in the *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol 26, 1998, pp 1-16.
- 55 Janet McCalman in 'The Inaugural Melbourne Debate', pp 9-10.
- 56 *ibid*, p 11.
- 57 Robert Manne arguing for the affirmative in 'The Inaugural Melbourne Debate', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol 26, 1998, pp 1-5. See also W E H Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, 1968 Boyer Lectures, Sydney, Australian Broadcasting Commission [1969].
- 58 See for instance Robert Manne, 'On political correctness', *Quadrant*, January-February 1993, pp 2-3; 'The puzzles of Manning Clark', *Quadrant*, November 1994, pp 2-3; and 'Eric Hobsbawm's Century', *Quadrant*, July-August 1995, p 71.
- 59 Robert Manne, 'The Liberal revival', *Quadrant*, April 1996, pp 2-3.
- 60 Robert Manne, 'The Coalition and the Aborigines', *Quadrant*, September 1996, pp 3-4.
- 61 Robert Manne, 'Humphrey Bare', *Quadrant*, July-August 1997, p 4. See also Robert Manne: 'I: A piteous tale', *Quadrant* June 1997, p 2; and 'The removalists', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April, 2000.
- 62 Manne in 'The Inaugural Melbourne Debate', p 5.
- 63 Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, p 258. Reynolds' article 'The public role of history', *Dissent*, no 3, Spring 2000, pp 2-5, also importantly illustrates his 'Black Armband' crusade for the truth.
- 64 See for instance Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, History Dept James Cook University, Townsville, Qld, 1981; and Henry Reynolds, *Frontier*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987
- 65 Stephen Muecke, 'No guilt with black armband', *Financial Review*, 4 April, 1997.
- 66 See Stephen Muecke, 'Discourse, history, fiction: language and Aboriginal history', *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1: May 1983, p 71; and Stephen Muecke, 'Lonely representations: Aboriginality and cultural studies', Bain Attwood and John Arnold (eds), *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, La Trobe University Press in association with the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University, Bundoora, Vic., 1992, p 43.
- 67 Muecke, 'No guilt with black armband'.
- 68 Rachel Buchanan and Paul James, 'Lest we forget', *Arena Magazine*, no 38, Dec-Jan 1998-9, pp 25-6. See also: Richard Hall, *Black Armband Days*, Vintage, Milsons Point, NSW, 1998, pp 1-8, who contended that slogans like 'Black Armband' set up false categories. Instead, he argued, Australian history has had days which require black armbands, days which should be mourned and not forgotten; and Carole Ferrier, 'White Blindfolds and Black Armbands: The uses of whiteness theory for reading Australian cultural production', *Queensland Review*, vol 6, no 1, pp 42-9, who critiqued the simplicity and the political implications of such slogans.
- 69 Tony Barta, 'Where the black armband fits', *Age*, 29 May, 1995. May 1999, pp 42-9, who critiqued the simplicity and the political implications of such slogans.
- 70 Birch, *loc cit*.
- 71 See Ann Curthoys, 'Mythologies', Nile (ed), *op cit*, pp 12,16; and Ferrier, *op cit*, p 42.
- 72 Don Watson, *Caledonia Australis* (2nd ed), Milsons Point, NSW, Random House, 1997, p xxvii.

Why We Need Black Armbands

Adi Wimmer

- 1 John Howard, 30 Oct 1996.
- 2 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Drawing up a balance sheet of our history', *Quadrant*, July-August 1993, pp 11-15.
- 3 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Bulletin*, April 1997, p 57.
- 4 *ibid*, p 8.
- 5 Blainey, 'Drawing up a balance sheet of our history', *op cit*.

A Poetics of Failure is no bad thing: Stephen Muecke and Margaret Somerville's White Writing

Fiona Probyn

- 1 Margaret Somerville, *Body/Landscape Journals*, Spinifex Press, Carlton, 1999, p 5.
- 2 Krim Benterak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1996, p 26.
- 3 Stephen Muecke, *No Road: Bitumen all the Way*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1997, p 15.