

## Recent Australian Memoirs: claiming 'home', reclaiming 'country'

### Introduction

As a recent migrant to Australia, and a long-time fan of Tim Winton, I was immediately struck by the title of his 2015 memoir. *Island Home*, it proclaimed. Such possession, I thought, such pride. Such confidence. I felt rather envious – and also curious, having read *Land's Edge* (1993) some years before. Winton's third memoir was published in 2016, with the more tentative title: *The Boy behind the Curtain*. But in the meantime I'd also discovered outspoken Indigenous journalist Stan Grant, whose memoir, *Talking to My Country*, appeared on the shelves in 2016 (a follow-up to *Tears of Strangers: A Family Memoir*, published in 2002). At the book launch last year, I was bowled over by a man whose poise, wisdom, and wit reminded me somehow of Mandela.

I've chosen, here, to focus more fully on Winton, as I am more familiar with his writing. I'm more familiar too with his settler perspective – which is shaped and also defined by that of Grant, the indigenous Other.

To me, the memoirs form a kind of call and response, involving a whitefella and a blackfella. Strikingly, both authors proudly affirm their love for Australia, their 'home', their 'country'. However, they do so in different ways, and from very different perspectives, which I hope to explore here. The term 'country' has a specific Australian meaning, as Winton reminds: 'In my own lifetime,' he says,

Australians have come to use the word 'country' as Aborigines use it, to describe what my great-great-grandparents would surely have called territory. A familial, relational term has supplanted one more objectifying and acquisitive.

And so, modern Australian patriots are less eager about the nation, the flag, and more likely to 'revere the web of ecosystems that make a society possible ... as if the land were kith and kin.' Grant himself states that

for all that has divided us, we are here together in a land that has become home to us all ... There are white Australians who down the generations have become in their own way indigenous. They don't share our antiquity or our culture but they have

made their own here and it has formed them ... these people are now from here; they can be from nowhere else.

Both authors trace their ancestry to Irish convicts: like Winton, Grant tells us that his story begins 'in the hull of a convict ship and an Irishman in chains.' But this is only part of a story that goes back 65 000 years, when Grant's Wiradjuri ancestors first crossed the seas from Papua New Guinea. 'I am of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi,' Grant declares: he is part of the world's oldest living culture. Winton's ancestry, and therefore his association with his island home, goes back a mere 270 years, to 1788, the year the First Fleet landed at Sydney Cove. Almost two centuries before that, in 1606 – some 50 years before Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape – a Dutch navigator, Willem Janzsoon, had made contact with the land. The French soon followed. And then Captain Cook was sent on a voyage of exploration to find the Great Southern Land – Terra Australis Incognita – an unknown land that lived only in the imagination of Europeans. So it was that in 1770 Cook landed at Botany Bay, about a thousand kilometres south of Brisbane, where I live.

When Captain Phillips arrived with the first fleet, he carried a cargo of convicts. Initial contact with the locals was cordial, though this soon deteriorated as the colonists laid claim to land and resources. The long-term impact was devastating. With the landing of the tall ships, and the disgorgement of their pitiful human cargo, the long isolation of the southern land came to an end. Its indigenous people – as well as its fauna and flora – succumbed to the impact of invasion. Governor Bourke issued a proclamation, founded on the notion of Terra Nullius, that, prior to the Crown taking possession, the land belonged to no one. It took two centuries for this notion to be invalidated. In 1993, the Native Title Act finally recognised the traditional rights to land and waters of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In the judge's words: Australia had 'a national legacy of unutterable shame'. Significantly, the Australian Human Rights Commission defines native title as 'a property right which reflects a relationship to land which is the very foundation of indigenous religion, culture and well-being.'

Six times bigger than South Africa, Australia is the world's sixth largest country. It is also the world's driest continent. It is no surprise then that most of its inhabitants live along the coast, though many Aboriginal people live in remote outback communities. It's worth noting

that Winton's home state, Western Australia, is twice the size of South Africa, with a population of only 2.5 million.

Both Winton and Grant find themselves in a context that continues to feel the disruptive effects of colonialism, which has left entire populations unsettled and displaced. Today, indigenous people (Aboriginal as well as Torres Straits Islander people) form a mere 3.3% of Australia's citizenry. The flip side of this is the notion of the 'lucky country'. The current prime minister boasts of Australia being the world's 'most successful multicultural country'. For most of its 24 million citizens – one-third of whom were born overseas – it is a country blessed with abundance – not only in terms of resources, but also of space (the adjective 'great' is ubiquitous: the Great Barrier Reef, the Great Dividing Range, the Great Sandy Desert, the Great Outback – not forgetting the Great Australian Ugliness, with its strip malls and suburban sprawl).

In this context, what is the meaning of 'home'? Traditionally, it is the place where our ancestors used to live, the place of our origin. It suggests a sense of community, of belonging, of rootedness in the land – and for Winton and Grant, this is a felt-on-the-pulse, lived experience, integral to one's sense of well-being.

When Winton claims 'home', it inevitably conjures up Edward Said's reminder: such a claim 'always entails ... dispossession.' Here, of course, Grant's own claim, 'my country', implies the cost of such a claim, as he pleads to be heard, to be listened to by those who inhabit it. Each of these memoirists attempt to provide what Georges Gusdorf has described as 'the meaning of [their] own mythic tale' – whether this be the tale of the convict settler or the displaced indigene – or both.

For Grant, however, the concept of home is turned on its head – his writing speaks of unsettlement, as he tries to reclaim that which has been lost to him: as an indigenous man, he experiences the discrimination of the migrant – whether the post-war 'wog', or today's muslim – ironically, in his own country. For centuries now, his ancestors have wandered about, pariahs in the land of their birth – like Sol Plaatje after the 1913 Natives Land Act. To this day, indigenous people seek recognition (it was only 50 years ago that they were formally recognised as part of the Australian nation, counted in the census, subject to the laws of the federal government).

In a fundamental sense, Winton and Grant are both victims of Empire, and heirs of exile. Following a centuries-long exile from his ancestral Ireland, Winton today claims as his island home the very place where Grant's ancestors were massacred and dispossessed by those of Winton himself. In their memoirs, these writers bravely face what Edward Said describes as the 'rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home'. But their writings seem to hold out hope. In the Australian context, this rift may not be entirely 'unhealable' – as long as there is engagement with the land, and a desire to listen to, and understand, its people.

### **Tim Winton**

Winton was born in 1960 in Perth, Western Australia. Named a 'national treasure', he has twice been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize (*The Riders* in 1995; *Dirt Music* in 2002). He has written twelve novels, five short story collections, three plays, six children's books, and seven non-fictional works, and is a four-time winner of Australia's prestigious Miles Franklin Award. He's even had a fish named after him (upon which Winton wryly remarked: 'the redneck in me thought, "Well, I wonder what it tastes like?".').

At first glance, Winton is not racked with unease, he is not unsettled by the colonial legacy, the legacy of invasion. His early memoir is, instead, a lyrical celebration of 'home'. In *Land's Edge*, at the end of a long stay in Europe, he states: 'I am finally home'. On first glimpsing the Indian Ocean again, he 'flinches' at the sound of 'a school of whitebait cracking the surface'. His reaction – or rather response – is sensory, alert: 'It's alive out there. After the still, exhausted Aegean, where nothing moves but the plastic bags, it seems like a miracle ... I am at the beach looking west with the continent behind me as the sun tracks down to the sea. I have my bearings.' But this is not a romanticised landscape: 'Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert – a war of mystery on two fronts.' And having almost drowned, and got lost in the dunes, he says: 'I love the sea but it does not love me. The sea is like the desert in that it is rightly feared. The sea and the desert are both hungry...' And then, in claiming an Australian identity, he 'others' his ancestors: 'Australians do not go to "the seaside" the way the English do. We go with a mixture of gusto and apprehension, for our sea is something to be reckoned with.' In love with the land, seduced by the sea – this is what defines Winton: 'I feel part of the land I live on, but I

still stare out at the blinding field.’ The ultimate local writer, Winton celebrates Western Australia. In the ‘Power of Place’ – the title of a sketch in *Island Home* – he says: ‘The places most precious to me are those where the desert meets the sea. The littoral – that peculiar zone of overlap and influx – continues to sustain and fuel my work’.

Each of his memoirs consists of sketches, vignettes and stories that speak to one other, amplifying and echoing, touching and whirling, figures in a dialectical dance. Looping back to *Land’s Edge*, they take up themes, expand images. Throughout, Winton’s tone shifts from celebratory to nostalgic – though always with a tinge of a dry Aussie humour. And at times the tone is almost elegiac, as he recalls a youth dominated by the ocean and the ‘uncompromising landscape’ on the windswept shore of Western Australia. His working-class boyhood was, in retrospect, a unique privilege. ‘Space,’ he tells us, ‘was my primary inheritance... I’m part of a thin and porous human culture through which the land slants in, seen and felt, at every angle ... and over it all, an impossibly open sky, dwarfing everything.’

There are immigrants, he acknowledges, who ‘will never feel truly at home in Australian landscapes’ – but then, as a kind of consolation, perhaps an encouragement, he sings it into being for any such reader. In a Whitmanesque way, Winton writes himself into existence, defining himself against his colonial, convict inheritance. The very act of writing gives meaning to his own mythic tale – the quintessentially human tale of the migrant. And always, Winton focuses on detail – making the reader see and feel the spiky spinifex, the hardy plant scattered across the coastal dunes. With him, we feel the whipping wind of WA, smell the ocean, and see the sea creatures, from tiny molluscs to majestic dolphins and endangered dugongs. Winton explores the possibilities of communion between self, other and landscape, and in so doing his writing breaks with formal traditions. The memoirs are not presented in a linear form; rather, they are fragments which are recalled, re-woven, and reconstituted with a vividness that illustrates the value of recollection in tranquillity – many were in fact written decades after Winton’s initial experience. Though the ‘I’ is at the centre of his writing, it is all but egocentric: instead, it demonstrates – or enacts – an emptying out of ego, as Winton, like Whitman, seems to transcend conventional boundaries of the self.

While Winton is clearly anxious for the well-being of his island home, his writing seems, at first glance, to be empty of personal angst. It lacks the dark, looming anxiety of, for

example, JM Coetzee's autobiographical subject in *Youth*, who is constantly aware that 'the ground beneath his feet is soaked with blood and the vast backward depth of history rings with shouts of anger'.

Of course, there's no getting away from the fact that the ground beneath Winton's feet is 'soaked with blood' – the blood of convict lashings, and of Aboriginal massacres. And today there are audible 'shouts of anger' that burst from the past, demanding to be heard, and for past injustices to be redressed. Yet Winton manages to hold a steady gaze – straight and uncompromising. For, as his writing suggests, his relationship with the land – and its people – seems profoundly empathic.

Winton describes the disarming 'stoicism' of Aboriginal Australian peoples, who, far from envying non-indigenous people, seem openly to pity 'any citizen who lacks the richness of traditional culture'. Indeed: 'Aboriginal wisdom is the most under-utilized intellectual and emotional resource this country has', Winton declares (this includes 'back-burning', during fire season). This wisdom is tied to 'country': The 'simplest and most profound lesson to be learnt,' he says, 'is that the relationship to country is corporeal and familial' – it is felt in the body, and it is tied to a sense of community.

Winton's 'I' gives way, cedes ground, bows to this wisdom, as his narrative gives voice to an elder, David Banggal Mowaljarlai, who consoles whitefellas even as he urges them:

We are really very sorry for you people ... We cry for you because you haven't got the meaning of culture in this country. We have a gift we want to give you ... It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself.

Aboriginal culture proposes 'mutual respect, mutual curiosity and cultural reciprocity' – and Winton embraces this. Despite his declaration that he is 'not an optimist by nature', he sees glimmerings of change among younger generations who have come to understand that 'they live in a country where there are still things to be saved and treasure'; like people everywhere, they 'yearn for connection', realising that 'The earth is our home, our only home'. Winton urges the reader to heed this truth by resurrecting the voice of an Aboriginal elder from Kakadu:

*I love it tree because e love me too*

*e watching me same as you*

*Tree e working with your body, my body,*

*e working with us.*

*While you sleep e working.*

*Daylight, when you walking around, e work too.*

Winton taps into the ancient mystery and wisdom of a continent that 'is too big and rich and complex to be truly understood'. Harkening to Australia's past, he says: 'It's been a haven for humans for millennia and yet it is not humanized as other continents are'.

Winton's work is usefully approached by means of Ecocriticism, which engages with texts on the basis that actual places are crucial to the meaning of texts. Ecocriticism focuses on the relationship between literature and environment – in Winton's case, landscape and seascape – and the zone where these meet. Ecocriticism reveals the connectedness of natural systems, of which humans form part. These systems affect us, just as we affect them – often negatively. As human populations encroach, degradation and extinction loom. In a post-industrial world, man is pitted against nature, which is regarded as a mere resource to be exploited. Winton refers to the 'spurious economy', calling it a cult of 'endless growth and consumption' that has left a 'trail of destruction – to ecosystems, languages, cultures, entire peoples' – an oblique reference, perhaps, to Australia's world-record twenty-six years of uninterrupted growth. Faced with an embattled world that threatens to fragment, ecocriticism emphasises the interconnectivity of things. As Winton says elsewhere, 'the land is carried within, as a genetic connection ... We've imbibed it unwittingly, it's in our bones. Like a sacramental ache' – though this is probably not true of many sub(urbanised) Aussies.

In his 2016 sketch, 'Repatriation', Winton traces the process of reclamation following the withdrawal of wheat farming in WA. In the wheatbelt, 'trees have been exterminated' in 'a land scraped naked'. Eucalypts were once an essential part of the biodiversity of a region populated by nomadic groups of people. Like the trees, they have vanished from land

treated with 'billions of tonnes of superphosphate, which lured two generations of farmers into the delusion that their operations were sustainable'. To Winton, this land with its endless orderly rows of stubble and fences is 'the most sterile and desolate country imaginable'. But further inland, he tells us, it changes: 'the closer you get to the desert, the more life there is in the land ... enough birds, reptiles and mammals to let you feel you are finally back in Australia.'

Still, Winton feels alien here, he tells us: 'I'm a coastal person ... my abiding interest is the littoral'. But he discovers in this place 'a different kind of littoral, where eucalypts and mulga scrub overlap in a wash of unlikely biodiversity'. In what was recently a 'beaten down ... degraded' landscape, change is on the way: 'Here, in a state whose economy and mindset are bound up in an endless war against nature, private citizens ... have begun taking conservation into their own hands'. It is almost too late, though, as Winton tells us: 'Australia has the worst record of mammal extinction in the world: since European settlement twenty-seven species have disappeared entirely' – and marsupials are in particular decline – a result of land-clearing and devastated habitat, as well as the introduction of foxes and cats (the latter killing 75 million native birds and animals every night). The casualties include bilbies, numbats and potoroos. In what amounts to an elegy, Winton lists these and other 'troubled species' such as the 'boodie and the woylie, the elusive wambenger, the chuditch, the short-beaked echidna, and several species of dunnarts, bandicoots, bats, wallabies' – and, increasingly, the cute little koala.

Winton's literary heritage is generally one of dismay at the land and the landscape: many of his predecessors tried, and failed, to make sense of a continent that overwhelms, which threatens and mystifies, with cycles of devastating drought and relentless rain: the life-sapping Big Dry followed by the terrors of the Big Wet. And so, many Australian writers seem compelled to leave the country for long periods, in order, perhaps, to see more clearly, to be able to write about the place. For Winton personally, Patrick White's masterpiece, *Voss*, was a 'turning point', describing an 'expeditionary hero' who 'ventures out into the hinterland to conquer distance. He aims to master country and fill its apparent emptiness by his sheer presence, with his ego and his sense of European destiny. In the end he's swallowed up operatically by desert, a victim of his own ignorance'. But there is another hero that Winton points to: the character Heriot in *To the Islands* by Randolph Stow

(written the year after *Voss*, in 1958). Like Voss, Heriot undertakes a blundering journey through remote bushland, but instead of seeing it as something to be conquered, he surrenders to it, becoming one with it, in what Winton describes as an act of 'tragic antipodean acceptance, even an apotheosis'.

On an excursion to a remote part of WA, Winton himself feels overwhelmed by the enormity of the night sky, and the 'great and terrible expanse of the vast inland Lake Moore': In Wordsworthian terms, he tells us: 'The moon overhead is almost oppressive and I hadn't anticipated how intimidating the luminous expanse of the lake would be.' In what amounts to an epiphany, he recalls the three girls immortalised in the film, 'The Rabbit-Proof Fence' – Aboriginal children, he reminds us, who were subjected to a 'the blind and pitiless logic of institutionalised racism'. The memory bears down on him: 'I twist down into my canvas cocoon and cannot help but think of the three small girls who trekked alone through this country back in 1931'. Winton names the girls: 'Molly Craig, Gracie Fields and Daisly Kadibill [who] spent nights hiding in hollow logs and walked all day for nine weeks at the mercy of forces crueller and more implacable than landscape. They were up against the blind and pitiless logic of institutionalized racism. And here I am, a big pink grown-up with a Land Cruiser, beginning to feel – well, a little uneasy in the moonlight'.

The source of Winton's unease is, arguably, deeper than the mere fear of the vast natural forces that threaten to subdue him. Its origins lie in the cataclysmic event of 1788, which now unsettles his own presence on 'country', as the first people continue to ghost through an emptiness that is all but empty. He describes an 'Aboriginal ceremonial place' whose origins were blurred and all but lost after the 'traditional folkways' were 'catastrophically ruptured by pastoralism and government policies of dispersal [or massacre] and abduction'. In the wake of this, 'local people are a sad diaspora, living hundreds of kilometres apart in settlements with meagre traditional association or none at all.'

Winton's eyes and ears are tuned to the history of country, to the intergenerational trauma that lingers on the air: 'There are human sites in this country that thrum with power, places whose ancient presences intimidate and confront'. Today, Lake Moore is a place without people: it is bereft. Winton records the impact of colonialism on culture: 'Across Australia, many of the 250-plus Aboriginal languages have disappeared since the colonial era ... The

coercive paternalism of earlier eras has been replaced by a paralyzing and infantilizing regime of cradle-to-grave welfare' – known locally as 'sit-down money'. And despite 'significant legal and political advances', Winton wryly observes that 'In some Aboriginal communities the funeral has become the dominant form of social gathering.'

Winton walks the land in sadness and anger, yet despite the 'old war on nature' he senses a shift – 'a new attitude to country, a sense of responsibility and respect evident in the language and actions of land users and custodians'. Sheep stations have become destocked, becoming Indigenous Protected Areas under the custodianship of local indigenous families. The scorched earth may yet be rescued by cultural change, a growing celebration of 'authentic' Aboriginal relationship to the land, and a growing concern for wilderness (interestingly, Australia's Royal National Park is the world's second oldest – after Yellowstone – and some ten years older than the Kruger National Park).

Returning to ecocriticism: indigeneity is a foremost concern, and it's worth noting that Australia's indigenous people are today among its poorest and lowest paid. It is at this point in Winton's writing that class could be said to intersect with race. He proudly claims his working class origins: his family were 'battlers' – unpretentious, working-class toilers: 'The people I knew identified as working class. Proud and resentful, we were alert to difference', he says. And so, he tells us: 'We expressed the casual racism of our time. We played sport with blackfellas but didn't really socialise...' In a sketch titled 'Dodnun, 2006', an adult Winton explores the impact of this boyhood experience (Dodnun is the name of a rural outstation). Winton tells us that he has planned a trip to 'country' with an Aboriginal elder, a former stockman named Paul Chapman, who goes by the name of Chapman, or – its corrupt form – Jadman. The sketch begins ominously – and perhaps predictably:

Chapman's drunk when we arrive to collect him, and my heart sinks ... At the kitchen bench, beleaguered but stoical, his wife Dorothy chops meat in a welter of flies while Chapman sits on his bed nearby.

We see an image of defeat – a stereotypical image of an Aboriginal man today: Chapman is passive, 'hapless and befuddled'. But the rest of the story subverts this. We watch as Chapman slowly rouses himself, gradually sobering up over the next few days, regaining his dignity in the process. At the prospect of going home, he becomes 'clear-headed and full of

purpose' (211). Then, headed towards Mowanjum, Winton introduces us to an indigenous community of three hundred people, which

was established after the demise of the Kunmunya Mission in 1956, when the closely allied Ngarinyin, Worora and Wunambal peoples were separated from their ancestral lands in the north Kimberley. Mowanjum is not the traditional home country of these peoples, but after many years of forced removals it has become, at least as its name suggests, 'settled ground'.

Amid the community's trash-strewn streets, the 'car wrecks and twitching dogs' sits 'the flash new arts building' – a five-million-dollar project, we're informed. The incongruity is striking. Winton fills in the backstory: 'under the old paternalism Chapman and Dorothy worked for little more than tucker and tobacco' – but, he tells us, and this is crucial: 'they were still close to country with its precious sustaining power', a period that ironically – and tragically – came to an end 'in the late 1960s, when pastoralists were finally forced to pay their labourers a decent wage'. Here, Winton embeds a landmark historical event in the story of Chapman: the 1967 Referendum, which brought Constitutional recognition to indigenous people. But the unintended consequence was estrangement from the land, as many who worked on farms were laid off, told to leave their home, their country. This event is reflected in the song, 'Tie me kangaroo down, sport':

Let me abos go loose, Lew  
Let me abos go loose  
They're of no further use, Lew  
So let me abos go loose.

Winton and Chapman journey on, and, upon glimpsing his home country – named, ironically, the King Leopold Ranges – Winton observes a change in his companion. The mountains are 'as gold as roo [kangaroo] fat in the afternoon light', and when Chapman sees them he 'jerks upright and slaps his thigh'. Winton describes his transformation: 'the beaten old wreck I collected in town is a sprightly, bright-eyed man. For him, the trip is no sentimental return, it's life support'. 'Hapless and befuddled' a few days earlier, Chapman is

now 'a man restored'. Winton's sketch ends with the words of Chapman's countryman, the 'legendary statesman' David Mowaljarlai:

When I'm on a high mountain looking out over country, my Unggurr [life-force] flows out from inside my body and I fall open with happiness.

The same may be said for Winton himself, when he returns to Australia in 1988 after a year spent first in Paris, with its 'hard surfaces and primly divided space', where 'playing on the grass was illegal' and then Ireland. The opening sketch in *Island Home* shows Winton and his son in County Offaly, battling a storm on a 'suddenly savage afternoon'. The scene is ominous: 'Black sky down around our ears, my son and I climb the stile in the frigid, buffeting wind.' He and his son are on an island, a small island – Ireland, Eire – but this alien and inhospitable place is clearly not home. The storm brings to an end yet another 'short, dull day'. Later that evening, his son stares at 'snapshots of home pinned to the wall' – photographs of 'suncreased faces' and 'bare chests'. Pictures, too, of 'Dogs in utes' [utility vehicles/bakkies]. Winton projects an image of his son's longing: 'The endless clear space behind people, the towering skies and open horizons ... the dreamy white beaches and mottled limestone reefs'. The boy looks up from the photograph and asks, 'Is it real?' 'It's home,' is the father's reply 'Remember? That's Australia.' Ireland's 'physical confinement' hit home hard that windy afternoon. And the longing for a dog and a ute concealed a deeper longing – for the very thing that makes such simple things possible in the first place: this thing is the 'wild spaces' of Winton's 'Australian life'.

And so, Winton returns to the place where he grew up: 'the world's largest island'. He contrasts 'Australia the place' with 'Australia the national idea, the economic enterprise', and laments the fact that the latter constantly overshadows the former. He is not interested in flag-waving, or national competitiveness. Winton's sense of his Australianness emerges from something far more primal: 'Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit as geological as family'. He experiences the pull of 'the island continent' – its 'tectonic grind' – as 'a familial ache'. In the Old World of Europe, he feels 'unsettled', as if his 'body were in rebellion' or all his 'wiring was scrambled'. Even the grandeur of the Alps is ultimately 'claustrophobic': for Winton, a West Australian, is 'instinctively searching for distances'. The imagery is powerful: formed by landscape, Winton reacts to the 'relentlessly

denatured' places of Europe, the 'unrelieved enclosure and domestication' of a continent where even the sky 'looked colonized, its curdled atmosphere a constant and depressing reminder of human dominion'. In claiming that he is 'calibrated differently to a European', Winton sets up an opposition between his Irish heritage and his Australian identity, which is founded upon, and interwoven with, a 65 000-year-old history. It is this identity that he claims. But it comes at a cost.

'I feel ancestral shame,' Winton confesses, 'for the dispossession of this country's first peoples, shame for the despoliation of their lands'. Significantly, though, he feels no guilt, as 'None of us is responsible for the culture and social conditions we're born into.' But he is quick to state that this 'doesn't mean we're absolved from reflecting upon our inheritance. Neither does our good fortune give licence to mindlessly replicate the settler ethic of two centuries ago.' Explicitly, he disavows 'the colonial mindset bent toward annexation, enclosure, consolidation and jealous surveillance in defence of territorial gains' – a practice that 'has retarded Australians' social and spiritual progress'.

Winton likens the status of humans in the cosmos to that of spores, the tiniest of organisms. Likewise, 'in an island continent like Australia' we are 'mere creatures of the earth, vulnerable and dependent'. He goes on to caution newcomers who may be 'enchanted by the place' that 'it will always slip through your fingers'. Traditionally, the settler impulse is to subdue and control, and as such it is a form of paternalism. But the island continent reverses this relationship, ultimately reminding all settlers that they are 'children of the island'.

Winton states that Australia is the 'place where he is from'. This descendant of settlers is also a child of the island – the child of country. He claims the country as his home. But it is clear that he does so in a manner that differs fundamentally from that of a Wiradjuri man such as Stan Grant, who ends his memoir as he begins it, with the confident claim: 'My country: Australia'. This is because he can say: 'My children and their children will be Wiradjuri people', while Winton can not.

**Stan Grant**

Stan Grant's memoir is described as a 'meditation on race, identity and history'. But it is far more than this. 'These are the things I want to say to you,' is the opening sentence of *Talking to My Country*. 'I am angry,' Grant continues, refusing to repress his feelings. As a Wiradjuri man, he says: 'I want to tell you about blood and bone and how mine is buried deep in this land.' But he also explains how he came to have 'the name of an Irishman, a name from a time of theft and death.' He tells his country: we 'are tethered to each other – black and white, the sons and daughters of settlers, the more recent migrants and [his] own people with tens of thousands of tradition'.

Grant takes the reader on a journey that begins in his parents' home, a place where settlers murdered his people, called Poison Waterholes Creek. It is a place, he tells us, that 'still envelops' him. It is from this position of trauma, of woundedness – that he fearlessly questions the validity of the claim made in Australia's national anthem: 'we are young and free'. Grant goes on to make a crucial distinction between Aborigines and other colonised peoples, for example in China or the Middle East: 'These people still had their country,' they had a 'flag of their own choosing', and sang their own anthems. But, he says: 'We were overrun, and our fate decided by others.' This legacy 'is passed through generations' it 'casts a shadow ... and no matter how far we travel from the battleground that shadow hovers still. We know this,' he declares.

Like Winton, Grant frames his memoir with the story of his fellow traveller, his son, who is a constant reference point. The presence of the sons is symbolic: having faced the spectre of the past, both writers peer towards a future that beckons, one where a new generation learns the lessons of a bloody and destructive past. But a spectre haunts 'Australia fair', as Grant points out. Though claiming to be 'young and free', it is tainted with an original sin – but it turns away from the question that demands to be answered : Was it right to claim this land?

There is a moral burden that non-indigenous Australians bear, and for all former Prime Minister Rudd's famous 'Sorry' speech in parliament, there has been no healing of the wound, no justice, and therefore no reconciliation, Grant argues. As an aside, though, I'd like to say that, as a newcomer to Australia, I am deeply moved by the ritual 'Acknowledgement of country' ceremonies that precede official events: 'I'd like to begin by

acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present.’ These ceremonies are criticised as failing to take into account the fundamental connection between dispossession and disadvantage, and the consequent disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, while they are often described as mere tokenism, they are at least some kind of beginning. The next step might be the inclusion of a verse in ‘language’ in the national anthem – as in New Zealand. But more is needed, and so indigenous leaders have called for a treaty. Recently, Gallarwuy Yunupingu, former Australian of the Year, called for a final settlement of grievance, termed Makaratta: ‘An action that says to the world that from now on and forever the dispute is settled; that dispute no longer exists; it is finished.’

The biggest obstacle that indigenous people face is The ‘Great Australian Silence’ – a phrase coined by anthropologist Bill Stanner to denote ‘a cult of forgetting practised on a national scale’. The dark side of this silence is what Grant calls Aboriginal ‘invisibility’. But in breaking this silence, Grant attempts to make his countrymen *see* – and also to *feel* – the profound attachment of Aboriginal people to country. This attachment has withstood the disruption and dispossession that condemned not only his father, but also his people, to a life of vagabondage.

Grant’s memoir is an uncompromising expose. His people have the highest incarceration and suicide rates in the world. It is no wonder that the anger he feels ‘flares suddenly and with the slightest provocation.’ It comes, he says, ‘from the weight of history.’ Past Australian governments classified Aboriginal people according to a ‘quantum of blood’ – though, currently, an Aboriginal person is officially ‘someone who is a member of the Aboriginal race of Australia, identifies as an Aboriginal and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal’ – an identity that is proudly claimed by an increasing number of Australians. Grant contends that ‘settlers’ equate belonging with acquisition, with ‘how much they have acquired’. This is not, of course, true of Winton, for whom belonging is signalled by connection, by attachment and submission to the land – and, in a sense, to its people. Settlers ‘look out’, they ‘look forward’, says Grant – implying a will to power, or perhaps just to survive. But as an indigenous man, Grant himself must first look back – in anger – before he can look forward in hope. Throughout the memoir, this anger is, however,

tempered: 'I love Australia,' he says, 'and I love its people' (the mother of his son is white, he tells us).

As Winton weaves into his text the gently accusing voices of Aboriginal elders, so Grant gives voice to former Prime Minister Paul Keating, who confessed: 'We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers'. Truth is the painful precursor of reconciliation, and for Grant, a basic truth is the deep ambivalence he feels: 'I have always been torn between the sadness of my history and the beauty of my country. Sometimes I can feel that the land itself understands this struggle. When I am alone by a river or driving across a plain I can hear this land talking to me, and it is always subdued.' In hurting its people, the victors hurt the land itself. So deep is Grant's own hurt that he once sought escape – to 'loosen the yoke [of history] from [his] neck'. But has since returned to his country, which, as he recently reminded us, has 'three grand, interwoven traditions': the 'ancient and enduring place' of the first peoples; the British legacy; and the richness of its migrant story.

## **Conclusion**

Grant poses the question whether an indigenous person, 'whose identity is bound in land and family' and who has been 'formed in his land can find another home far, far away?' The question seems to imply that the connection with the land is the same for all emigrés. But is this the case? In our 200 000-year-old human history, Aboriginal people seem to be unique: an unbroken 65 000 year-old-relationship with the land has resulted in a particularly strong connection with country. Grant's words to his son, 'this is where we are from,' bear the weight of millennia. They echo Grant's own generous concession to settlers: 'these people are now from here'. And yet, however passionately Winton might say to his own son, 'we're from here, this is where we are from' – his island home is not, and can never be, country.

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