

# Reconciliation and ‘The Great Australian Silence’

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## Abstract

*In 1968, W.E.H. Stanner delivered a lecture, The Great Australian Silence in which he argued there was a ‘cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’ (Stanner 1968) concerning many areas of Indigenous and non-Indigenous history in Australia, such as invasion and massacres. In 1991, the Australian parliament unanimously implemented a reconciliation process which aimed to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the centenary of federation in 2001. A key goal of this process was to educate the wider Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous history. In this paper, I examine the efforts made during the reconciliation decade to address ‘The Great Australian Silence’. I analyse the publications developed during the process that were designed to educate the wider community about Indigenous and non-Indigenous history. I argue that these publications were restricted in detailing Indigenous and non-Indigenous history due to the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process.*

## Introduction

In 1968, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner delivered the second of his 1968 Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Boyer Lectures, *The Great Australian Silence*. In the lecture, Stanner (1969, 22-5) argued that several critical areas of Indigenous and non-Indigenous history, such as invasion, theft of land and massacres, had generally been long ignored by Australian historians. Stanner (1969, 25) further argued this ‘silence’ did not result from individual historians neglecting these issues, but instead

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.

This 'cult of forgetfulness' emerged in the late nineteenth century, during a period of growing Australian nationalism and campaigning for Australian federation (Reynolds 1999, 92), and continued for decades. Apart from some isolated instances, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that anthropologists and historians started writing on the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, including the invasion, frontier violence, massacres and genocide (Attwood 2000, 254-5; Reynolds 1999, 114; Sharp 1998, 32). By the 1970s and 1980s, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, including Richard Broome, Kevin Gilbert, James Miller, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, were writing revisionist histories on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations (Broome 1982; Gilbert 1973; Miller 1985; Oodgeroo Noonuccal 1981; Reynolds 1983; Ryan 1981; see also Blacklock 2006 for a discussion on Indigenous historians).

Despite these revisionist histories however, by the late 1980s, the wider Australian community remained woefully ignorant of the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia. In 1991, in an attempt to address this ignorance, as well as dealing with Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and Indigenous concerns regarding the Hawke government's failure to address Indigenous rights, the Australian parliament unanimously passed the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991 (Cth)* (CAR Act) (Gunstone 2009, 1). This act implemented a ten-year reconciliation process in Australia which aimed to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia by the end of 2000, in time for the centenary of federation in 2001 (CAR 1994a, 15). The process was facilitated by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). The process had three broad goals: to educate the wider Australian community about Indigenous issues and reconciliation, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous history; to develop a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in areas such as health and education; and to consider the desirability of a document of reconciliation, and if considered desirable, to develop a document of reconciliation (CAR Act 1991, 3-4).

In this paper, I explore the efforts of CAR to educate the wider community about Indigenous and non-Indigenous history. In particular, I examine a specific CAR program relating to the education goal that focused on developing publications on Indigenous issues and reconciliation. Throughout the reconciliation process, CAR produced a variety of education publications aimed at the wider community, specific sectors of the community and

governments. I analyse these publications and argue that, to some extent, they did attempt to address ‘The Great Australian Silence’ by detailing the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. I also argue though these publications were restricted in educating the wider community about this history as a result of the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process.

This nationalist framework attempted to address concerns about Australia’s national identity held by both those opposed to the revisionist histories on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations and those sympathetic to the histories (see Phelps 2004, 24). The former saw the revisionist histories as an attack on Australia’s national identity. For instance, businessman Hugh Morgan criticised the judges in the High Court’s *Mabo* decision, which recognised Indigenous native title, as ‘being ashamed to be Australian’, they ‘have no pride in their country and they strive mightily to melt it down and recast it, furtively, in a new self-deprecating and much diminished mould’ (cited in Gaita 2001, 25; see also Gale 2001, 128; Howard 1997). The latter reacted to the revisionist histories with feelings of shame and guilt and a questioning of the moral legitimacy of the Australian nation (Attwood 2000: 55; Manne 2001, 104; Mulgan 1998: 184-5). The nationalist framework attempted to assist both groups to feel more confident about themselves and the Australian nation (Ferrier 2000, 5; Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2000, 7-8). As stated above, reconciliation was supposed to be achieved by the centenary of Australian federation (CAR 1994a, 15). CAR’s Vision for reconciliation mentioned ‘a united Australia’, ‘this land of ours’ and ‘justice and equity for all’, but ignored Indigenous rights (Gunstone 2009, 56-7). Nationalist language, such as ‘united nation’, ‘one nation’ and ‘walking together’ was used and Indigenous peoples were referred to as ‘first Australians’ (Clark 2005). Key reconciliation events were held on anniversaries of the 1967 Referendum, which was represented as including Indigenous peoples in the Australian nation (Gale 2001, 129). There were two key, related consequences from this framework in relation to this paper: first, the marginalisation in the reconciliation process of Indigenous rights, such as sovereignty, self-determination, land rights and a treaty, which have been long advocated by Indigenous peoples, but were difficult to accommodate within the nationalist framework; and second, the emphasis in the reconciliation process on Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples sharing a single national history (Chandra-Shekeran 1998, 123; Gale 2001, 129; Gunstone 2009, 147; Rolls 1998, 171-2).

## Publications

CAR produced a broad range of publications aimed at educating the wider Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues, including about the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. Some of these publications were the *Study Circles* and *Learning Circles* kits, the *Walking Together* magazine, key issue papers, information sheets, annual and triennial reports and education material for the national media (CAR 1994a, 25).

CAR organised the development of the *Study Circles* kits, later called the *Learning Circles* kits, to assist in educating the wider community. Over two thousand *Study Circles* kits were distributed to workplaces, churches, trade unions, community organisations and interested groups throughout Australia (AAACE 1993, 4). It was argued by the developers of the kits, the Australian Association of Adult and Community Education (AAACE), that they provided ‘a way for groups of people to discuss the vital issue of the way we in Australia relate to the country’s indigenous peoples: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ (AAACE 1993, 9). The coordinators of the kits, Bob Boughton and Deborah Durnan, argued that the ‘ultimate goal’ of the *Study Circles* kits was to ‘facilitate the process of “perspective transformation”’ (AAACE 1993b, 2). CAR stated that the kits ‘covered topics such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, contemporary issues, causes of disadvantage and the case for reconciliation’ (CAR 2000, 62). The kits also encouraged people to become involved in community reconciliation activities (AAACE 1993, 10). The kits though were limited in their capacity to educate the wider community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues, including the histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. The kits did not discuss a number of Indigenous rights, including Indigenous sovereignty, and did not contest the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process.

The *Walking Together* magazine was published quarterly throughout the reconciliation decade. The magazine, which reached a circulation of 75,000 copies per issue, ‘served as Council’s major vehicle of regular communication with schools, peak bodies, sectoral organizations, MPs, local governments, community organizations, reconciliation groups and interested individuals’ (CAR 2000, 23). Again though, the magazine was restricted in

educating the wider community about Indigenous issues and reconciliation. The magazine was influenced by the focus on nationalism within the reconciliation process. The magazine's title was *Walking Together*. The magazine predominantly covered 'feel good' events, focussing on Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples 'working together', such as flag raising ceremonies. On the rare occasion it covered more 'political' issues, the magazine remained within a nationalist framework. One example was when the magazine discussed the *Wik* native title decision and its relevance to reconciliation (CAR 1997b, 6-9). Of the four articles on this topic, none were written by an Indigenous person, with all four being written by non-Indigenous people with connections to the pastoral industry. The authors were the president of the National Farmer's Federation, the president of the Queensland National Party, a past executive director of the National Farmer's Federation and a pastoralist. While the authors had different opinions on the *Wik* decision, all argued nationalist ideas and none discussed Indigenous rights, such as sovereignty, a treaty or self-determination.

CAR also developed eight key issue papers regarding Indigenous issues and reconciliation. CAR stated that the key issue papers 'are intended to be educational documents for general distribution, to be used by the community to advance their awareness' (CAR 1993a, v). CAR distributed the key issue papers to Indigenous communities and to the wider community all over Australia and sought feedback regarding the papers (CAR 1993a, 1-3). These key issue papers were also constrained in educating the wider community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues. The issue papers were influenced by the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process. For example, one key issue paper, *Agreeing on a Document*, stated a range of options for a document of reconciliation (the third CAR goal), all of which failed to address Indigenous sovereignty (CAR 1993a, 51-4). Further, CAR required that any feedback to the key issue papers from the Australian community be restricted to addressing the limited questions contained in the papers (CAR 1993a, 2). Also, none of the key issue papers were authored by any Indigenous people who opposed the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process, such as Paul Coe, Gary Foley or Michael Mansell. The key issue paper most relevant to this paper was *Sharing History*. This key issue paper advocated the development of a single, shared national history for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

A shared sense of history has the potential to be an influential agent of reconciliation ... By actively sharing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' history and culture, non-indigenous Australians are able to lengthen and strengthen their

association with this land. Any immigrant peoples will, for a time, experience a degree of historical discomfort in a 'strange' and 'new' land, and one way of coming to terms with an adopted country is to view the land through the eyes of its indigenous owners. In forging a new identity, the immigrant peoples in Australia have sought to share with, and often appropriate, indigenous symbols, motifs, phrases, and place names - defining Australia's distinctiveness by seeking to share Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' culture and history (CAR 1993d, 1).

The reconciliation process seeks to encourage non-indigenous Australians to deepen and enrich their association with this country by identifying with the ancient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presence in Australia. A common misconception is that Australia is the youngest continent – only 206 years old – whereas in reality it is one of the oldest: both in terms of geology, and continuous human history. It is only through indigenous Australians that non-indigenous Australians can claim a long-standing relationship with and a deeper understanding of Australia's land and seas, in a way possible to other nations who have occupied their native soil for thousands of years ... Thus a sense of identity and pride can be gained from the length of time Indigenous Australians are known to have lived here (CAR 1993d, 28-9).

This nationalist attempt to create a shared, single national history might 'lengthen and strengthen' non-Indigenous people's attachment to Australia, but could also restrict the advocating and recognition of many Indigenous rights, including self-determination, sovereignty, a treaty and land rights. As Moran (1998, 109) argued:

Official Reconciliation represents a new phase of a more continuous nationalist project aimed at resolving the colonial legacy of 'shallow history' for the nation, enabling it to tap into deep sources of connection with the continent through the full incorporation of indigenous people. At the same time, by making the indigenous 'Australian', the settler nation would remove an alternative and competing claim to the *national* [original emphasis] landscape.

CAR also published ten one-page information sheets on a range of areas relating to Indigenous issues and reconciliation. These information sheets contained less education material than the key issue papers, but shared the same weaknesses. The information sheets

stated nationalist opinions, did not mention Indigenous sovereignty and only mentioned a limited form of Indigenous self-determination. One information sheet, *Controlling Destinies*, trivialised the notion of Indigenous self-determination by comparing it with Parents and Citizens Associations exercising self-determination in schools (CAR 1998a, 1). Further, none of the information sheets, including those that specifically explored issues of native title and stolen generations, mentioned political debates, such as possible legislative amendments to the *Native Title Act 1993* and demands for the national parliament to apologise to the stolen generations (CAR 1998b, 1; CAR 1998c, 1). Also, the one information sheet that addressed the meaning of reconciliation, *Building New Relationships*, defined the term in nationalist tones, stating ‘reconciliation is really all about forging a new relationship between the wider community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – one that heals the wounds of the past and ensures a fair go for all Australians’ (CAR 1998d, 1).

Several reports to the Commonwealth government were also published by CAR, including the three triennium reports, *Walking Together: The First Steps – Report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to Federal Parliament 1991-94* (CAR 1994a), *Weaving the Threads: Progress Towards Reconciliation – Report to Parliament covering the Second Term of Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 1995-1997* (CAR 1997a) and *Reconciliation: Australia’s Challenge – Final Report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Parliament* (CAR 2000). In these reports, as well as outlining their activities and achievements, CAR often included limited information about reconciliation and Indigenous issues, including the history and goals of the reconciliation process and the relationship between reconciliation and Indigenous issues, such as the stolen generations and native title (CAR 1992a; CAR 1992b; CAR 1994a; CAR 1997a; CAR 2000). This information though was insufficient to educate the wider community about Indigenous issues and reconciliation, including the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. The failure of these reports to detail Indigenous and non-Indigenous history was in stark contrast to reports produced by other national reconciliation processes, such as South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Moran 2006, 117). The CAR reports also either ignored or marginalised Indigenous rights, including sovereignty, self-determination, a treaty and native title, and approached reconciliation through a nationalist framework. The reports also generally provided vague and nationalist definitions of reconciliation, such as improving relationships and attitudes (CAR 1992a, 6; CAR 1997a, 3).

CAR also developed education material that was circulated through the national media in the wider community. Education material was included in several newspapers and magazines with large, national circulations, such as *The Australian*, the *Australian Women's Weekly*, *New Idea* and *TV Week* (CAR 1994a, 25). This practice contributed to the promotion of reconciliation among the wider community. However, the nationalist nature of the education material, as well as the material's inability to define reconciliation, restricted their capacity to educate the wider community about Indigenous issues and reconciliation. Further, CAR developed television advertisements regarding reconciliation and Indigenous issues. These series of one-minute advertisements were called *Footprints* and they aimed to provide to the wider community, 'an insight into Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures, history, people, achievements, organisations and perspectives' (CAR 1994a, 25). Although these advertisements could have increased awareness of reconciliation among the wider community, the brevity of the advertisements would have significantly restricted their ability to educate the wider community on Indigenous issues and reconciliation.

Many CAR publications, such as their annual and triennium reports and *Walking Together*, discussed the community reconciliation activities that were occurring throughout Australia. In a 1995 report, CAR provided examples of 'Australians working together to make their communities better, breaking the barriers between them' (CAR 1995a, 2). CAR's 1995-1997 report stated that 'the AFR [Australians for Reconciliation] network is alive with activities including public meetings and guest speakers, awareness programs in schools and other institutions, support for newly-established reconciliation groups and study circles, and discussions at many levels' (CAR 1997a, 8). However, the activities discussed in CAR's publications were limited in their capacity to educate the wider community on reconciliation and Indigenous issues. The activities were entrenched within a nationalist framework. The activities highlighted Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples 'working together', but generally failed to mention Indigenous rights or racism. In *Ideas for Action, Proceedings of the Australian Reconciliation Convention*, CAR detailed sixty community reconciliation activities. Racism and self-determination are mentioned just once, and sovereignty not at all, in the discussions on these activities (CAR 1997d). Another publication, *The path to reconciliation: issues for a people's movement*, contained nationalist discussions on 'reconciliation and Australian values', and 'what it means to be an Australian citizen?', and failed to acknowledge that opposition existed to its view that Indigenous self-determination

should be exercised 'within the political and legal structures of the nation' (CAR 1997c, 10, 18, 50-1).

CAR also produced a range of publications in relation to educating specific sectors of the wider community regarding reconciliation and Indigenous issues. These sectors included mining, industry and community groups.

CAR developed two publications regarding the mining industry. The first publication was *Making Things Right: Reconciliation after the High Court's Decision on Native Title*. This publication discussed the reconciliation process, the High Court *Mabo* decision and the relevance of this decision to the reconciliation process. The publication though marginalised discussions of the High Court's view on Indigenous sovereignty and ignored the criticisms from some Indigenous leaders, such as Michael Mansell, of this view (CAR 1993b, 8, 22). The second publication was *Exploring for Common Ground: Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Australian Mining Industry*. This publication argued that Indigenous peoples and the mining industry had to communicate more constructively with each other and be better educated about each other (CAR 1993c, xiii). Although CAR stated in this publication that it was a 'neutral intermediary' in discussions between Indigenous peoples and the mining industry, it favoured a position, advocated by the mining industry and rejected by Indigenous leaders, that disputes concerning land use were 'not capable of being mandated into existence' (CAR 1993c, xi, 26). Also, the publication adhered to the nationalist discourse by stating the importance of better understandings between Indigenous people and the mining industry to 'improve the social and economic future of Australia as a whole' (CAR 1993c, ix-x, 35).

CAR developed several publications regarding the Australian business sector and the Australian union movement. One publication was *Business and Reconciliation*. This publication focussed on a narrow notion of equality by stating the need for 'ensuring equal opportunity' and 'providing a fair go' and did not address Indigenous rights and positive discrimination (CAR 1995b, 3). It also focussed on nationalism, by stating the need for 'working together as a team' and 'a united workforce' (CAR 1995b, 3). Another publication was *Unions and Reconciliation*. In this publication, CAR did not provide much information on Indigenous issues and reconciliation. The publication equated the struggles of Indigenous peoples and unionists and failed to acknowledge a range of factors that have impacted upon

Indigenous peoples, such as invasion, loss of land, frontier violence, genocide and racism (CAR 1994b, 1). This publication was also influenced by nationalism as it defined reconciliation as ‘working together’ (CAR 1994b, 1). It also emphasised the times when unions have supported Indigenous peoples, such as the Gurindji land rights campaign, but did not acknowledge the decades-long history of racism within the union movement, including its support for the White Australia policy and its failure to address Indigenous stolen wages (CAR 1994b, 3). Finally, although CAR acknowledged in several publications that there were a number of contemporary concerns in the Australian business sector, including high Indigenous unemployment and racial discrimination, it did not state the historical causes of these concerns, including loss of land and stolen wages (CAR 1997a, 26-8; CAR 2000, 46-7).

CAR also developed several publications regarding a number of groups in the Australian community sector, including faith groups, sporting organisations and service clubs. These publications failed to outline the historical relationships between these groups and Indigenous peoples. The publication concerning faith groups, *Faith and Reconciliation: Sharing a new future by healing relationships*, minimised the immensely destructive impact that religion has inflicted upon Indigenous peoples, including destroying Indigenous culture and stealing Indigenous children, by stating that churches have operated with ‘goodwill’ since ‘European settlement’, although there ‘were some serious misunderstandings and negative consequences of this contact’ (CAR 1996a, 3). The publication concerning sporting organisations, *Sport and Reconciliation: Fair play for all Australians*, did acknowledge the historical discrimination of Indigenous peoples by sporting groups, but downplayed contemporary racism by stating ‘discrimination lingers in some isolated pockets’ (CAR 1996b, 5). The publication concerning service clubs and reconciliation, *Service Clubs and Reconciliation: Building better communities*, failed to discuss historical or contemporary racist practices by the clubs against Indigenous people (CAR 1996c, 2). Further, a range of nationalist phrases were stated in all the publications, including ‘build bridges’, ‘everybody deserves a fair go’ and ‘working together’ (CAR 1996a, 4; CAR 1996b, 3; CAR 1996c, 2).

CAR also produced publications designed to educate local governments about Indigenous issues and reconciliation. These publications included *Let's Get Together*, which contained a video and print material, and *Local Government and Reconciliation*. In addition, CAR encouraged the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) to develop two publications on reconciliation, *Celebrating Community: Local Government Reconciliation*

*Program* and *Justice and Equity for All*. These publications aimed to both provide information to local governments concerning reconciliation and Indigenous issues and encourage local governments to participate in community reconciliation activities (CAR 1994c, 2-8; CAR 2000, 42). A concern with the CAR publications was that they tended to focus on the local governments that supported reconciliation and did not discuss the local governments that were not involved with the reconciliation process. For example, *Local Government and Reconciliation* stated several case studies of local governments meaningfully engaging with local Indigenous peoples, however did not attempt to analyse case studies involving unsatisfactory relationships between local governments and Indigenous peoples (CAR 1994c, 1-8). Further, although CAR's second triennium report did explore examples of poor relationships between local governments and Indigenous peoples, it downplayed the level of these poor relationships throughout Australia by arguing 'while progress in many regions has been good, Council is aware that pockets of prejudice still remain' (CAR 1997a, 24). CAR's publications concerning local governments also failed to adequately define reconciliation, often defining the concept in nationalist terms, such as 'reconciliation means different things to different people, but most agree it is about indigenous and other Australians working together' (CAR 1994b, 2). The CAR publications regarding local governments further ignored several Indigenous rights, including sovereignty, which fell outside the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I analysed a broad range of CAR publications in relation to their addressing the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia, a key component of the CAR goal of educating the wider community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues. I argued in this paper that these publications provided limited information on Indigenous and non-Indigenous history in Australia due to the nationalist framework of the reconciliation process, a framework that marginalised Indigenous rights and emphasised a single, shared national history.

This paper has shown that, to some extent, parallels exist between the influence of nationalism, in the last decade of the twentieth century, in restricting the capacity of the reconciliation process to educate the wider Australian community about Indigenous and non-Indigenous history, and the influence of nationalism one hundred years earlier, in the last

decade of the nineteenth century, in developing the decades long 'cult of forgetfulness' and 'The Great Australian Silence' regarding the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia.

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