

ESSAY

The imperial mind

How Europeans stole the world

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IT IS A common vanity among humans that our ascent is an exponential trajectory applauded by gods.

Our religions encourage us to believe God has never seen anything as beautiful, dutiful and intelligent as we. Those religions also insist that as we are superb and closest to God's hem, all others are not and need our assistance to reach a developmental level that the imperialist calculates as being the true destiny of humans.

The planet, however, has a history of blind cul-de-sacs; the dinosaur, for instance, the dodo, the Phoenician, the Roman, the Nazi. Not sure about the dodo and the dinosaur, but the rest thought they were God's chosen children, that their magnificence had been sanctioned by the Creator.

The magnificent vanity to assume that God had chosen you to rule over all others. Of course if you create that god yourself then he is likely to approve of you or face the sack. Or at least a reformation.

Hierarchies of privilege were entrenched as standard social practice during this period of hubris. Kings and priests were appointed as a means of protecting the privilege of rank, property and religion.

The kings became ambitious and the priests saw advantages in courting that ambition. Eventually, ambition led to kings fighting kings in order to extend their influence and increase their access to the riches of the world. China and Europe fought countless wars against countries close to their borders in order to maintain or increase their position in the world hierarchy.

Whole armies and populations were butchered, cities sacked and peoples enslaved so that the greed and bloodlust of kings, pharaohs and emperors could be sated and the flocks and coffers of the priests burgeon.

When sailing vessels were constructed of a size and ruggedness to endure ocean crossings, the kings were quick to see further opportunities to satisfy their greed while the priests saw opportunities to spread the influence of their creeds.

The Chinese were interested in trade, and ventured across the Pacific in search of new and exotic goods. Their communications with the new worlds were generally benign and mutually profitable in both a commercial and social sense. The Europeans, on the other hand, were after conquest, and the priests were accomplices to those ambitions. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI introduced a Papal Bull, the Doctrine of Discovery, which declared that when Christians discovered a new land they had the responsibility to take the land away from people they judged as heathens – that is, those with a different god to the European god. If the people resisted, they had the right to take the land by force.

This application of theft and violence required some sophistry so that it could be squared with the Christian God's Ten Commandments. The logic went that murder and dispossession could be labelled 'just wars' and applied for the benefit of the murdered and dispossessed.

According to Robert J Miller in *Discovering Indigenous Lands* (OUP, 2010), the Spanish priest Franciscus de Victoria argued that the fact that 'Indigenous peoples were bound by European definitions of the natural law rights of the Spanish was an ample excuse to dominate, defraud and then engage in "just wars" against any native nations that dared to stop the Spanish from doing whatever they wished'. The sham of natural law meant Spain's rights were seen as 'naturally' superior to native rights and all of these assumptions were based solely on the papal belief in the superiority of their conception of God.

Robert A Williams Jnr described this assumption in his book *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought* (OUP, 1990). 'The West has sought to impose its vision of truth on non-Western people since the Middle Ages... sustained by a central idea: the West's religion, civilisation and knowledge are superior to the religions, civilisations and knowledge of non-Western peoples. This superiority in turn is the redemptive source of the West's presumed mandate to impose its vision of truth on non-Western peoples.'

This was never more vivid in my mind than when I visited the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver some years ago. I stepped through the door and stared up at a two-storey facade of a First Nation house, one of the most beautiful pieces of wooden art and architecture I have ever seen. I studied the story depicted on the columns and immediately slumped onto a seat, struck down by the idea that anyone could distort their mind to declare the builders of this facade as ‘savage’.

It told a story of the world being supported on the back of a turtle and that turtle being supported by another turtle and that second turtle being supported by a third and so on to infinity. Had anyone actually seen the turtle? No, they had imagined the turtle, just as Christians imagine haloes, angels with harps and God himself. To imagine God and then proceed to the conclusion that yours is the only one bedevils the world to this day. All of the world’s organised violence can be attributed to that hubris, or the greed of businessmen who cling to the sacred garment of their imagined god.

To question the European presumption of an architectural hierarchy is not to assume that the built environment defines civilisation but simply to highlight the West’s arrogance, its refusal to see excellence in the work of peoples from lands they intended to plunder. In fact, we must resist glorifying the edifice and make the hallmark of success sustainability and longevity. Over aeons Australian Aboriginal people adopted the lore from one generation to the next, not without refinements and adaptation, but without moving away from the central ethic that insisted that every person should receive equal access to housing, food, culture and education. That insistence on sharing the benefits of life may have precluded raising architectural monuments for the sake of single priests and kings. Of course that is a long bow, but our world seems never to have considered the greatness of modesty, falling into the trap of lording the edifices of the greedy few and the enslavement of the majority to erect them.

Robert J Miller argues the root of the Doctrine of Discovery goes ‘as far back as the fifth century AD when...the Roman Catholic Church and various popes began establishing the idea of a worldwide papal jurisdiction that placed responsibility on the Church to work for a universal Christian commonwealth. This papal responsibility, and especially the Crusades to recover the Holy Lands in 1096–1271, led to the idea of justified holy war by Christians against infidels to enforce the Church’s vision of truth on all peoples.’

Miller goes on to say that Pope Innocent IV wrote in 1240 that the Christian had a right to dispossess indigenous people because of the ‘papacy’s divine mandate to care for the entire world...[and] to intervene even in the secular affairs of infidels when they violated natural law. Natural law was, of course, defined by Europeans and the Church.’ The Teutonic Knights at the Council of Constance in the fifteenth century argued that land could be taken from heathens with impunity.

Justified holy war and the identification of ‘infidels’ highlights the intellectual and spiritual vanity of the Christian and explains how Indigenous peoples on four continents and several oceans would have their cultures attacked for not believing in the same sequence of gods and angels. Christian definitions also mandated the correct way to use the soil, and those who did not use it in a fashion understood by the European legal system were deemed not to have the same human and natural rights as the Christian.

The term ‘terra nullius’ – or empty land – arose directly out of the Doctrine as one arm of the justification in breaking the Ten Commandments. Lest the Christian population see through the ruse and rebel against the ruling of the clergy, in the nineteenth century the church adopted the *Peaceable Kingdom* paintings of Edward Hicks, in which the savage animals were lead into the Christian light by an innocent child. The paintings were displayed in most schools, churches, homes and government buildings, and were purportedly necessary to show indigenous people how to live properly. Or, as was the case for most, to die properly.

WE ARE SO used to this insidious propaganda that its influence has become subliminal. An example of its success in quelling any questioning of the status quo was demonstrated to me one day when I had time on my hands in a Brisbane hotel and became so bored I read the text around the perimeter of a painting that had been a pervasive presence throughout my life.

On the walls of that hotel were two old prints of animals and children in a style as familiar to my generation as the Hoover twin tub. So familiar, their intent had eluded me. The borders of the paintings ran with a text I must have seen a thousand times in people’s homes, old wares shops, the maudlin manse, school halls and virtuous hospitals. ‘The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.’

Both pictures were similar and the texts almost identical. The art depicted benign lambs and leopards, innocent goats and a milk-fed, chubby child leading a dangerous animal. Even the cows looked like they'd never kicked over a bucket or thought of butting the dairyman. These were two of Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom* compositions.

I read these texts with mild interest simply because there were no jam tins handy. And then I saw in the background what I'd never noticed before. In one print, almost hidden by a bridge, is a group of figures.

I had never finished reading these texts in the past because I could sniff out a biblical text from ten metres and was intent on eluding the entrapments of the mild Christ and his devout followers. The many variations Edward Hicks employed in these paintings had the intention of pretending the victim was the agent of their own fate and that soon they would be led to righteousness, but more importantly, landlessness.

The tiny tableau beneath the bridge was dominated by men in tricorn hats who extended their hands in the classic stance of mild Christian kindness. The group of First Nation Americans before them almost bowed in devotion, wearing feathers and skin tunics to show their heathen wildness but now with awed, supplicant faces.

I went to the sister print and there was a similar scene. On the opposite side of a river to where the bouncing babe was leading a retarded leopard, the tricorn hats were advising Native Americans of their good fortune. The text of this one began, 'When the great Penn his famous treaty made with the Native American chiefs in the elm-trees shade, the wolf and all that other nonsense laid down with whomever.'

I stared at these prints for an hour, impaled by the butterfly collector's pin. This was the art and text of Christian colony. Every brush stroke, every word had been calculated to appease the spirit. Not the spirits of the Native Americans, theirs were crushed within months of meeting the hats; it was the Christian spirit which needed a salve, a godly reason for taking another's land, a validation of greed.

I leant against the wall overwhelmed by the meticulous planning and implementation. The actual taking of the land was made possible by those Vandals and Goths, common in any society, who arrived on whaling boats and galleons. Their lust for women and gold had always made colonial transition so much easier. It was said the smallpox contagion was deliberately

applied to blankets and given to resistant bands of indigenes: to infect, demoralise, depopulate and depress.

William Penn was a wealthy English Quaker who was given a tract of land that he called Pennsylvania (Penn's woodlands). He arrived in 1682 determined to raise a community dedicated to the gentle words of the Sermon on the Mount.

He was said to deal kindly with the natives, for which they were grateful. Those on their knees are likely to be grateful for the extended hand of a gentle man. They grant Penn an extension of his land measured by an area that could be walked in a day and a half. Penn's successors clear a path of trees and logs and train athletes to run as far as they can in a day and a half. In relay. They claim twelve-hundred square miles.

Penn's 'treaty' with the Native Americans could only be forged because by 1684 they had become impoverished and powerless. He couldn't be blamed for the actions of his descendants but it says a lot about the ability of the Sermon on the Mount to saturate and instruct the Christian soul.

Those who wrought the relay-ruse of land acquisition were now represented in this west-Brisbane hotel by a chubby and angelic child whose conquest of savage beasts, those that quivered to nuzzle the child's plump paw, represented the conquest of the Americas by Christians. The savage spirit quelled and brought to heal by the mildest of restraint.

I stared and I stared. The elaborate performance and explanation of colony was deeply embedded in both the Bible and the Church, and we are lulled into believing the story by tracts as pervasive as the chubby child's personal circus.

Hicks's paintings evolve directly from the assumptions of the Doctrine of Discovery. The paintings of innocent animals being shown the light of Christ were simply the advertisement to calm the Christian conscience about the invasion of new lands.

Over centuries the Doctrine was invoked to deny any challenge to the validity of those invasions and allowed politicians and priests to picture all the indigenous peoples as savages who would fall away before the force of superior intellect and belief. Thomas Jefferson's Native American negotiator felt so superior to those to whom he was supposed to dispense some land justice that he called them children.

In 1793, George Washington described this outcome as 'the Savage as the Wolf'. Washington assumed the Native American lands would fall to the

United States as their inhabitants shrank away from superior beings in the same manner as the wolf avoiding contact with humans.

This conceit was first used to try to intimidate the Mongols. The whole basis of the ruse is that the Christian religion is derived by the operation of the Holy Spirit and therefore beyond the realm of men. As a result it is incontestable.

THE IMPOSITION OF the West's superiority is still alive today and was made explicit in 2007, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by a vote of a hundred and forty-three to four. Who were the four? The US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia: the colonial governments who have most to lose if rights are extended to the indigenous.

All four nations use the Doctrine of Discovery as their authority to dispossess people, even though, in each case, the British Crown had urged a more conciliatory and caring approach. James Cook's instructions in Australia were to 'cultivate friendship and alliance' while seeking 'the consent of the natives'. These sentiments seem to have been little more than tokenistic for parliamentary liberals as it never operated as firm policy on the ground.

The Declaration was drafted by dozens of countries over a period of twenty years, but only four countries in the world saw it as a threat. This was a moment of shame for Western colonial societies. Self-interest plunged these four into an alliance of denial. Hand-wringing about 'closing the gap' is just a smokescreen to obscure Australia's real intention, which is to perpetuate the dispossession and justify it with the Intervention.

One of the most important tasks of the imperial colonist is to ensure that the previous occupiers of the land are expunged from memory. Cecil Rhodes made it a jailable offence for anyone to refer to the city of Great Zimbabwe, built by the Shona people in the south-east of Zimbabwe in the eleventh century. It was important to construct and embed a story of the hopeless savage so that European occupation would seem a necessary part of god's design.

In Australia, where Edward Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom* tropes were employed as part of colonial tactics, educators, politicians and clergymen were relentless in their depiction of Australian Aboriginals as helpless savages. Their efforts proved successful because the true description of the Aboriginal

culture and economy was completely erased from the public conscience and, amazingly, from the public record.

Much of the material about European explorers' first contact and observation of Aboriginal Australians and their culture has been excluded from the national text, so historians, scholars, educators and nation builders have never read it. This process has continued through each generation of scholars and educators for the past two hundred and thirty years. It is an epic achievement of conniving censorship: racist in intent, and deliberate and calculated in performance.

Those early scholars, and the legions who have followed, would have read that explorer Sir George Grey, the first Englishman in parts of Western Australia, saw many, many fields of the tuber *Dioscorea hastifolia* stretching to the horizon. He was never able to calculate the length of the fields because they were so deeply cultivated that it was impossible for him to walk across them. Each field had well-established roads and irrigation points, and substantial villages where the cultivators lived.

Charles Sturt was saved from death in the very heart of Australia by people who were cultivating, harvesting and milling grain to make the bread that the explorer said was the lightest and sweetest he had ever tasted. Not only does this information never appear in an educational or historical text, it doesn't even make it onto our cooking shows where we drool over other countries' recipes when we have on public record several explorers who refer to Indigenous products as the most flavourful they had ever eaten.

Thomas Mitchell rode through nine miles of stooked grain on what is now the NSW–Queensland border. The word 'stook' should alarm anyone who claims to know Australian history. A stook is a bundle of grain that has been harvested, gathered into sheaves and stood on end to ripen. No Australian should leave primary school without knowing this – but in fact all of us do. And secondary school, and university. It is a horrible manipulation of history that two and a half centuries of good Australians have died not knowing a fact that would transform their understanding of their country, their culture and their soil.

Isaac Batey noticed that the hillsides of Melbourne had been terraced by the cultivation of murnong, *Microseris lanceolata*. As a result of this agricultural practice the soil had such a light tilth that you could run your fingers through it. Twelve months after the introduction of sheep, the murnong had been

eliminated and the soil compacted into a hard, impenetrable pan, so hard that rain ran off the surface immediately and caused the first floods the local Kulin clans had ever seen. The accepted Australian history revels in the pastoral deeds of pioneers and we all learnt that the Australian economy rode on the sheep's back. Such is the pervasive Australian silence, however, that we have never learnt that the soil was destroyed by sheep's hooves.

The fish traps at Brewarrina, north-west NSW, were so large and so productive that the local people prepared and stored tonnes of flour in readiness for the arrival of fisher people from the surrounding clans. Some say the traps are the oldest human construction on earth. Say that last sentence slowly to yourself and then wonder why these traps do not appear on any Australian's travel bucket list.

As Australia begins a debate about the date of its national holiday, I wonder if this new intelligence will liberate us sufficiently to search for the real Australian culture.

CHEFS HAVE BEEN excited by bush tomato, saltbush, lemon myrtle and bush raisin for a decade or more and laud the virtues of 'bush tucker', which makes it all the more surprising that the nutritional and economic staples of grains and tubers, the bread and potatoes of Indigenous people, have been ignored. Or is it that 'bush tucker' reinforces a description of First Nation peoples as wanderers, opportunistic hunters and gatherers, people that it could be claimed did not own or make utility of the land? I believe this selective reference to the Aboriginal economy is part of the colonial process. Unfortunately, it has robbed us of important agricultural and environmental information.

The plants Aboriginal people domesticated are, of course, Australian, and have prospered within the confines of Australia's soil moisture levels and fertility. Most are perennial and all are adapted to Australia's environment so require little or no water, no fertiliser or pesticides. In a drying climate – and at a time when many people accept that excessive chemical use is harming the planet and constant ploughing is releasing too much carbon into the atmosphere – these plants could be good for the environment and excellent for the economy. Surely we have to let go of the colonial propaganda about Aboriginal land practice in order to contribute more responsibly to environmental protection and our own financial welfare. Perhaps we might

even admit a truer reflection of the nation's history into our schools and the national conversation.

I spent the last few days before 26 January working with Aboriginal people to celebrate our culture and then, while travelling home, listening to Australians whinge about the 'change the date' campaign. My skin is so light I often hear what mainstream Australia really thinks – and it is a scary revelation. There is incomprehension, bitterness, vindictiveness but, most importantly of all, an impoverished understanding of the national history.

This encapsulation of ignorance is preventing our full embrace of the land. If we could understand the brilliance of the Australian agricultural mind we would meet our carbon-emission reduction targets easily. The domesticated Aboriginal grains and tubers are mostly perennial, so their cultivation requires far fewer tractor hours, thus saving the soil from compaction and the air from pollution.

The ability of these plants to flourish in our climate and soils will save us billions of dollars. The yields will not always be as great as the plants we have introduced from overseas, but can be grown over greater areas and at far less expense. Why aren't we using them? Because they question our assumption of scientific superiority and the very occupation of the continent? Well, as John Howard said, get over it.

The world is in too precarious a state to allow us to hide our head in the sand any longer. For the sake of the continent and our economy we have to embrace the nature of the continent and the knowledge of our people gathered over a longer period than any other culture on Earth. Be proud rather than angry, this is the real nature of the land we all say we love.

For references, see griffithreview.com

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