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Mabo and the Paradigm-Shift in Australian Historiography

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the beginning of a paradigm-shift in the field of European-Aboriginal relations in Australian historiography. The change was completed in 1992 by the decision of the High Court of Australia in *Mabo v. Queensland (No.2)*, which sanctified the findings of new historians, and codified – thus completed – the paradigm-shift. The change in historiography was not exclusively a self-generating process, but it was the result of multiple factors: new historical research generated by anthropology, jurisdiction, and politics. As Noel Pearson put it in his Opening Address at the Mabo Conference in London (1996):

There are three things which seemed to me to be emerging signs of prospects of reconciliation in Australia. Firstly, there has been the revolution in our understanding of the country's history to which historians such as those who are attending this conference have contributed, as well as numerous indigenous oral historians. Secondly, there has been the decisions of the High Court of Australia in the Mabo Case, and thirdly, there was former Prime Minister Paul Keating's landmark speech at Redfern Park in December 1992, where he admitted the truths of the past on behalf of the Australian government and people.¹

Since the early 1970s there has been a movement to deconstruct the colonial vista. The works of conventional historians came under attack, and new

¹ Noel Pearson. "Land Rights and the Mabo Decision in Australia." *Aboriginal Land Rights: Australia and the Mabo Judgement Conference*, London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, U of London, 18-19 Apr. 1996. p. 6.

historians began to fill in “the great Australian silence”² by giving voice to the Aboriginal experience of the past of the continent. The “return of the Aborigine” was accompanied by a corresponding acknowledgement that they had been prior to the British, and the event of colonisation came to be interpreted as invasion rather than discovery, settlement or occupation. Overall, the legitimacy of the British claiming the land of Australia was brought into question. The new paradigm represents the coming of the Europeans in terms of dispossession, violence, racial discrimination, destruction, exclusion, exploitation, and extermination. Works with opposing views on European–Aboriginal relations were published side by side in the decades between 1970 and 1990, until finally in the *Mabo* case and the consequent Native Title Legislation the results of historical research found their way into law and politics. The *Mabo* decision crowned the development of Australian historiography between 1970 and 1992: a new historical paradigm had emerged.

First published in 1962 and followed by a revised edition in 1970, Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* introduced the concept of scientific paradigms into contemporary academic life. Although its basic premise is in natural sciences, this historio-philosophical treatise became one of the much discussed and most influential studies in the field of humanities. Without discussing Kuhn’s theory, this paper will apply his terminology of “paradigm,” “crisis,” “anomaly,” “revolution,” and “paradigm-shift” to the Australian historiographical revolution in the last three decades. To fulfil this aim, it will first be necessary to describe the concept of paradigm.

A paradigm is a framework within which “normal academic research work”³ takes place with its own system of methodological norms. The paradigm also works in a sociological way: it organises the academic world and defines an academic canon. The community of scientists and scholars maintains and protects the paradigm by following it in their work and prescribing it to future generations of scholars in textbooks, handbooks and examinations. In Kuhn’s words:

² The expression “the great Australian silence” was created by the eminent Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in the 1968 ABC Boyer Lectures to describe the lack in historical and anthropological discourses.

³ The term “normal academic research work” is adapted from Kuhn. “Normal” here means “mainstream.”

These [paradigms] I take to be universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners.⁴

When normal science or scholarship loses its way and cannot ignore any longer the anomalies that have disrupted traditional practice, extra-ordinary research begins, which leads either to the adjustment of the paradigm, or, if even more anomalies emerge, to a substitute-theory. Extra-ordinary research forces new responsibilities and a new working framework upon the academic world. Kuhn calls such changes in scholarship "scientific revolutions." The new theory is accepted as a new paradigm because it can dissolve anomalies more successfully. The old paradigm as opposed to the new one is not necessarily better or worse in terms of ethical judgement, and thus colonial views about Australian history that are now stigmatised as conservative and obscurantist could have been considered at the time of writing as modern. Therefore, these works should not necessarily be condemned. It is only natural that paradigms compete with each other, during which the formerly modern or canonical views become obscurantist and the provocative is newly accepted as modern.

The greatest social and political change in the field of Aboriginal affairs in Australia took place at the end of the 1960s, after the 1967 Referendum had eliminated racist clauses from the Commonwealth Constitution and gave power over from the states to the Commonwealth government to legislate for Aborigines. This involved giving full citizenship rights to the indigenous inhabitants, including the right to vote without restrictions and be included in the census. The Australian people supported the Referendum by over 90% yes votes, which gave equal political rights to the indigenous people, but did not automatically involve equal treatment, an end to discrimination, or access to land rights. Nevertheless, the greatest historical significance of the Referendum was that it acknowledged the presence and survival of the indigenous peoples in Australia, and after long decades of protection and assimilation, politically overrule the general assumption that the Aborigines were "a dying race." It, however, did not affect the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the foundation stone of Australian law and history. Thus, in the first major court case about Aboriginal land rights, the *Gove* case of 1971,⁵ Justice Blackburn refused to recognise Aboriginal native title to land, because he was not prepared to overrule

⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 1960. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996, p. x.

⁵ *Millirpum v. Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth*. *Federal Law Review* 17 (1971) p. 141.

established Privy Council precedent. His legal opinion rested on his interpretation of history, including *terra nullius*, as much as on his assessment of the law. He ruled that historical revision could not be used to change legal principles which were made at a different point in time.

The Referendum was initiated by the Holt government (1966–67) partly under pressures from the socio-political realities of Australian life that had piqued the United Nations,⁶ and partly as a result of the findings of anthropological research. These acted as catalysts at the launch of a paradigm-shift in historiography. Prompted by them, new historical research began to excavate the “dark side” of Australia’s past to enable contemporary society to answer such crucial questions as: Why do Aborigines die in large numbers in spite of the welfare measures of the patronising government? Who owns the land the Aborigine live on? Was Australia occupied peacefully or invaded with force?

However, it was not until 1992 with the High Court’s decision in *Mabo v. Queensland (No. 2.)* that the findings of the new history went into legal and political acceptance. In this courtcase, three members of the Meriam people (Murrey Islanders), indigenous inhabitants of Mer (Murrey Islands) situated in the north of Australia, reclaimed their lands from the Queensland government on the basis of continual and continuous occupation. The Islands were colonised by Queensland, which claimed sovereignty in 1879. The High Court decided that the native title of the Meriam people to their land was not extinguished by this step of the Queensland government, nor by any measures executed since 1879. The High Court declared the myth of *terra nullius* false. Meaning “no one’s land,” the Latin phrase refers to the common belief that the land of Australia belonged to no one, that it was not occupied by anybody before the white people came. This was declared false, as the High Court of Australia ruled that the Meriam people possess rights to their land, i.e. the islands they live on, on the basis of prior occupation.

A radical reinterpretation of history carried through the last thirty years provided a critical underpinning for the legal resolution ushered in by *Mabo*. In turn the judgement itself is also a major contribution to Australian historiography, which will influence the way history is taught and researched in the future. The land rights movement and the corresponding court cases provided an opportunity for the birth of a new historical paradigm based on the works of

⁶ F.G. Clarke. *Australia: A Concise Political and Social History*. Marrickville, NSW: Harcourt Brace, 1992, pp. 302–303.

C. D. Rowley, Henry Reynolds and others. The number of anomalies discovered by them in the interpretation of Australia's past called for further research. The demand for reinterpreting the history of the continent was strengthened by the *Gove* case (1971). In *Mabo*, however, as Reynolds puts it:

The High Court rejected the concept of *terra nullius* because it was so out of harmony with contemporary opinion and concern for indigenous rights in both international law and the domestic law of comparable countries. [...] But the *Mabo* decision is not just an ending. It is also a beginning. While the abandonment of *terra nullius* has extracted Australian jurisprudence from one set of historico-legal problems, [...] it is now in the midst of another one.⁷

After 3 June 1992 a new paradigm came to be accepted by academics, the law and politics, therefore it is reasonable to call the period after 1992 the *Post-Mabo Age*.⁸ *Mabo* marks a borderline: a new paradigm had emerged.

The survey of major history books written before and after 1970 shows significant differences between the works of "conservatives" (canonised historians unchallenged until the late 60s) and "attackers" (historians who started to shatter the paradigm in the early 70s).⁹ Histories before the 70s tend to be overwhelmed by – in Kuhn's phrasing – the normal academic activity of data collection. Substantial and bulky volumes of complete histories of Australia are published by historians who impose a "span" on the data to emphasise Australia's progress, the British legacy, geographical determinism, or other overall patterns that regulate the history of Australia. Noticeably, this is done with the help of literary skills, or to the least, very fine stylistic competence. "The author is distinguished in the fields of both history and creative literature," and "the book is based on extensive research and careful analysis," reads the jacket of Marjorie Barnard's *A History of Australia* (1962).¹⁰ The strong commitment to being stylish is likely to be the legacy of Sir William Keith Hancock, whose *Australia* (1930)¹¹ determined the

⁷ Henry Reynolds. *The Law of the Land*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1992, pp. 195–196.

⁸ See "post-Mabo period" and "post-Mabo archeology" in Mudrooroo. *Us Mob: History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1995, p. 219.

⁹ I adapt the distinction between "conservative" and "attacker" historians from Raymond Evans et al. *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland*. Race and Aboriginal Studies series. Brookvale, NSW: Australia & New Zealand Book, 1975.

¹⁰ Marjorie Barnard. *A History of Australia*. 1962. Australian Classics series. London: Angus & Robertson, 1980.

¹¹ W.K. Hancock. *Australia*. London: Ernest Benn, 1930.

standard of Australian historiography for more than three decades. Hancock's influence was unavoidable also because he wrote a primary school history textbook for a generation of children to grow up with.¹² Regarded by many as "one of Australia's finest ever historians,"¹³ he emphasised the need for "span" and ignored occasional slips of facts if they did not support the theme of the book or if they seemed marginal. His basic themes were "change," "progress," and an appraisal of the monarchy. His works allowed hardly any space for Aboriginal prehistory and contemporaneous history, taking for granted the extinction of its practitioners:

The advance of British civilisation made inevitable "the natural progress of the aboriginal race towards extinction" - it is the soothing phrase of an Australian Governor. In truth, a hunting and a pastoral industry cannot co-exist within the same bounds. [...] It might still be possible to save a remnant of the race upon well-policed local reserves in Central and Northern Australia. [...] From time to time it [the benevolent Australian democracy] remembers the primitive people whom it has dispossessed, and sheds over their predestined passing an economical tear.¹⁴

The tendency of being theme-oriented at the cost of undesirable facts and details, however, cost dearly by the 1970s. It led to the suppression of one major fact: that the Aborigines have rights on the continent due to prior occupation, and these rights were taken away from them in government-supported frontier violence. Emerging new histories from the 70s go back to the archives and to direct fieldwork to rediscover the silenced facts.

Pre-1970 Australian historiography abounds in legendary figures and mythmaking treatises. Manning Clark, another father figure of national history, was also noticed for generously and notoriously ignoring factual mistakes he made in his history. Being a great teacher and an exceptional character, he took the liberty of ignoring petty details for the sake of overall tendencies, and was to receive sharp criticism from some contemporaries and posterity in the mid-1990s

¹² W.K. Hancock. *Two Centuries of Change: An Elementary History for Young Australians*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1934.

¹³ Trevor J. Daly. "Discovering Hancock: A Profile of an Australian Environmental Historian (W.K. Hancock)." *Limina* 4 (1988) 69-84, p. 69.

¹⁴ W.K. Hancock. *Australia*, p. 33.

for "his cavalier attitude towards his evidence."¹⁵ Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) has suffered no less severe attacks for dismissing the Aborigines and women from his story of the formation of a national identity. Geoffrey Blainey's *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966) rapidly dismisses the question of Aboriginal resistance as a "relatively mild threat,"¹⁶ thus taking the side of "occupation" as opposed to "invasion" in the debate. Even in his more recent books and journalism, he has denied the relevance of the colonial Aboriginal past to the present:

My view is that we should be proud of much of the *ancient* Aboriginal history of this land; we should be proud of much of the British history of this land.¹⁷

In other words, he is willing to praise Aboriginal history as a separate entity as long as it does not interfere in time, space or events with the Australian past of his traditional narrative, i.e. the paradigm of Australian history beginning from 1788. Bain Attwood concludes that

Blainey's allowance for this pre-colonial past is relatively unimportant, for it is either deemed to be already past or it is assumed that will eventually become so in effect, and so is incommensurate with the British Australian past which, by comparison, is conceived of as part of the ongoing Australian present.¹⁸

Certainly no two books of the pre-1970 period are identical and equally ignorant of the central role of race relations in Australia's past. General features, however, are easily deductible from a summative reading of these works.

They start the chronology of Australia's history from the European discoverers and the arrival of the First Fleet of convicts in 1788. They devote virtually no place for Aboriginal prehistory, so consequently, there is no place for describing European-Aboriginal relations in colonial times either. There is no acknowledgement of the conflicts that resulted from the co-existence of the black

¹⁵ Carl Bridge. "Manning Clark and the Ratbag Tradition." *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered: Maintaining a Monocultural Tradition in a Multicultural Society*. Ed. Adi Wimmer. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1999, p. 236.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Blainey. *The Tyranny of Distance*. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966, p. 132.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Blainey quoted in Bain Attwood. "Mabo, Australia and the End of History." *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*. Ed. B. Attwood. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1996, p. 109.

¹⁸ Bain Attwood. "Mabo," p. 109.

and white races. The settlement of Australia becomes a remarkably peaceful event, devoid of violence on the frontier. Colonisers fight with the land and not its inhabitants. Pioneering settlers conquer large portions of the empty outback, which, in turn, forms the Australian character: the bush becomes the centre of the national ethos. Geographical or environmental determinism forms the fate of the white people. From the perspective of a white-centred historiography, the Aboriginal experience of the past can be ignored as insignificant in the progress of the Australian nation. Accordingly, the Aborigines do not seem to belong to the past of modern Australia. Russel Ward gives voice to this conviction in the preface of his *Australia: A Short History* (first published in 1965):

This book seeks to stress those elements in Australian history which have been most influential in giving the inhabitants of the country a sense of their own distinctive identity, and so in making a new nation.¹⁹

If the existence of Aboriginal civilisation on the continent is dealt with in more than half a page, the emphasis is always on the helplessness of the primitives in the face of the superior British civilisation. Aboriginal-white relations surface in central policies only; relations are limited to some description of contact through missions, governmental policies, and protecting institutions. His subchapter entitled "Mild Aborigines" illuminates Ward's conception of a frontier without firearms where there was no violence between Europeans and Aborigines because of the latter's unwarlike nature:

One difficulty that Australian pioneers [...] did not have to contend with was a warlike native race [...] men seldom had to go armed on the Australian frontier.²⁰

Some descriptive features of the general histories before the paradigm-shift include a small-case spelling of the words "aboriginal," "the aborigine," and "natives," because they were not recognised as a people, let alone peoples. Rather, the policies of the protection era (1890s–1940s) preferred segregating them to reserves, so that they could be taken care of as children or wards for their own good. Neither history, nor the law, nor politics regarded them as a people with cultural, proprietary or political rights on the continent. The assimilation era (1940s–1960s) brought some concern for the plight of the unfortunates in the

¹⁹ Russel Ward. *Australia: A Short History*. Walkabout Pocketbook series. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1975, p. vii.

²⁰ Russel Ward, pp. 25–26.

form of improving social conditions, but no revaluation of their role in the nation's past and present. A tell-tale conclusive sentence of Barnard's *A History of Australia* created a wide uproar among the Aboriginal people of Australia:

Gradually we may become one people. The most practical thing that those who criticise native policy could do would be to marry an aboriginal, bring up their half-caste children to marry white again, and so assist nature's remedy of assimilation.²¹

Book covers also emphasise peaceful and progressive colonisation. A common pattern is to represent Sydney Cove and one of the first governors surveying the landscape with a sailing ship in the background so as to acknowledge and maintain the link with Britain. The powerful symbolism of such an image is even more evident when it comes into confrontation with the silenced undercurrent of Australian history. The front cover of the fifth (1975) edition of Russel Ward's *Australia: A Short History* displays a photograph of Sydney Harbour with the Opera House and an ocean-liner passing by, presumably symbolising Australia's progress in the last three centuries. Definitely not a larger time-span because Ward does not give voice to the Aboriginal (pre)history of the continent. The titles of the first and second chapters are "Australia today" and "Convicts and currency, 1788-1821," which shows that the first marked date as well as a period-start in Australian history is 1788. The content, thus, is in sharp contrast with the name of the *Walkabout* Pocketbook series and its logo: an Aboriginal X-ray painting. Even the titles of the chapters are underlined with a symbolic snake figure as an obvious reference to Aboriginal culture and art. The attempt of the publisher to include the Aborigine into Australian culture is not reflected in the content of the book which is clearly about the political history of white Australia.

A major theme of post-Mabo history, the Aboriginal experience of the past was virtually absent from the old paradigm. It is not that it was unknown: the coexistence of the indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in the country was an everyday social reality in Australia, however politically suppressed the facts and the implications were. But the part the Aborigines had played and were later doomed to play in the formation of the continent was regarded as insignificant compared to the progress made since the coming of the white civilisation. Occasional attempts to assess race relations reflect a lack of research not only

²¹ Marjorie Barnard, p. 666.

because of ideological reasons, but because of the lack of sources. The *Historical Records of Australia*,²² the multi-series and multivolume collection of government documents that historians relied on extensively, does not seem to have given adequate support to (any) researchers on this topic. The topic of Aboriginal (pre)history and culture, as well as European-Aboriginal relations belongs to the category of “the great Australian silence” at this time. W.E.H. Stanner

described this silence as ‘a cult of forgetfulness’ or ‘disremembering’ that had been ‘practiced on a national scale.’ [...] And, as well as there being a silence, there had also been a silencing: ‘the great Australian silence,’ Stanner argued, ‘reigns [over] the other side of a story,’ an Aboriginal history, the telling of which, he recognised, ‘would have to be a world [...] away from the conventional histories of the coming and development of British civilisation.’²³

Before rejecting the claims of the Yolngu clans to native title to their lands in the *Gove* case (1971), Justice Blackburn examined past evidence, and concluded that there had been no public recognition “that the relationship of the aboriginals to the land of the colony posed any serious problem.”²⁴ It is not surprising that he came to such a conclusion, given the silence of the old paradigm of Australian history on this crucial issue. Supported by new research, the *Mabo* decision (1992) brought an entirely different conclusion. Moreover, the majority of judges in the *Wik* case (1998) relied on the legacy of *Mabo* when they decided that the pastoral leases in front of the Court are a product of Australian history. Without going into detail on this specific case concerning one aspect of native title, let me point out that the judges relied exclusively on historical material before 1849. The primary sources used by them testify deep concern for Aboriginal property rights and legislate against the violent expropriation that took place on the frontier in those days. The *Wik* case reveals the strength of the new historical paradigm in two major points: (1) that the judges used sources that were rediscovered by new historians, and relied exclusively on the version of history according to the new

²² *Historical Records of Australia*. Ser. I-IV. Vol. I-XXVI. Sydney: Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1912-1925.

²³ Bain Attwood, ed. *In the Age of Mabo*, p. xiv.

²⁴ *Federal Law Review* 17 (1971) p. 255. quoted in Henry Reynolds. “Whose Land? Recognition of Aboriginal Ownership and the Promise of Compensation.” *The Land and the People: The Wik Lectures*. Ed. Richard Morton. Carlton, Vic.: History Institute, 1998, p. 28.

paradigm; (2) that since *Mabo* it became acceptable and “foundational” to use “a distinctive reading of history” “in the formulation of legal norms.”²⁵

The late 1960s saw the rise of a new generation of historians, who derived their fresh perspective from formidable studies in anthropology. C.D. Rowley observed that

a few young historians are beginning to work in the field of Aboriginal affairs, but it is mainly the anthropologists, in their attempts to explain how things got the way they are, who have been forced to write history.²⁶

The intrusion of anthropology into historiography became absolutely necessary at a point of time when “the great Australian silence” was becoming suffocating. Under the social and political pressures of the late 1960s, the old historical paradigm arrived at the stage of crisis. Attitudes, ideologies, methods, sources proved to be incapable of solving anomalies that surfaced whenever, in the atmosphere of political liberation, black and white voices clashed. As the old paradigm denied any relevance of an Aboriginal past to the present and failed to recognise the root of the problems in colonial history, a new discipline was called in to help. Anthropologists gathered data during fieldwork in day-to-day immersion into Aboriginal culture. Ronald Berndt kept his anthropological treatise *The World of the First Australians* deliberately descriptive so that the facts accumulated by individual scholars could serve as a foundation for well established new research instead of speculation. The findings accumulated in approximately three decades made him call out for the importance of having a “good grasp of the ‘facts’ of a situation before theorizing about that situation.”²⁷ Directed by C.D. Rowley, the Aborigines Project of the Social Sciences Research Council of Australia (1964–1967) was the first independently financed and controlled survey of Aborigines throughout Australia. As the first centrally governed survey in the field, it must have been a fertile source of new ideas for anthropology, historiography and, as a result, for politics – a kind of catalyst revealing anomalies and undermining the conservative paradigm. Surfacing

²⁵ High Court Justices quoted in Frank Brennan. “The Land and the People Today: Reconciliation.” *The Land and the People*. Ed. Richard Morton, p. 50.

²⁶ C.D. Rowley. *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*. Sociology and Anthropology series. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1972, p. 48.

²⁷ R.M. Berndt and C.H. Berndt. *The World of the First Australians*. 1964. Sydney: Lansdowne, 1977, Foreword, n.p.

anomalies included outstanding high rates of mortality, poverty, criminality, unemployment, health and housing problems, and all forms of racial discrimination on the one hand, and rich, vivid and diverse cultures with strong oral traditions of their attachment to the ancestral land on the other hand. The answers that old histories gave to problem-solving questions proved to be totally inadequate. In fact, both asking and answering such vital questions as “Why do Aborigines die in large numbers in spite of the welfare measures of the patronising government? Who owns the land the Aborigine live on? Was Australia occupied peacefully or invaded with force?” fell outside the scope of the old paradigm. Following the political changes after 1966, Rowley’s primary aim in *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* was to write a survey of Aboriginal affairs for practical use in policy making:

This survey should, I believed [*sic*], be as comprehensible as possible, offering a coherent view of past and present policies and practices, since there were no Australia-wide studies which could offer background on the situations which would have to be considered by policy makers...²⁸

He also predicted that the problem of dealing with the Aboriginal question in Australian society “is bound to become a major political issue,”²⁹ and his prediction came true in the movements for human and land rights for the Aborigine that resulted in the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act* (1975) and the *Commonwealth Native Title Act* (1993).

Rowley’s work is not another general history of Australia, although the scope it covers is not limited in time or space, understandably as a result of the overall survey the author directed. To the contrary, it is limited in topics. Rowley devotes a whole book to discovering fields of history that earlier historiography was practically silent about. “Failure of colonial administration,” “destruction,” “injustice,” are keywords from the titles of chapters and subchapters of his work, which were soon accompanied by “resistance,” “exclusion,” “exploitation,” “extermination,” “genocide” in articles and books by other anthropologically trained or infected historians, such as Kenneth Maddock, Raymond Evans, and Henry Reynolds.

²⁸ C.D. Rowley, p. v.

²⁹ C.D. Rowley, p. vi.

Besides enunciating that "the frontier in Australia has been marked with a line of blood,"³⁰ works of the new paradigm break down, or at least question, concepts of "progress," "assimilation," and "freedom." Maddock exemplifies the emancipation attempts of the Australian Aborigine with that of the German Jews to illuminate the nature of assimilationist policies, and to revise the established view about assimilation as a process. He writes,

if these criteria are all [i.e. progress is quantitative and accumulative in time (cf. Kroeber, *Anthropology* 1923)], then to defend Aborigines against assimilation is to hold out against progress.³¹

He suggests that the concept of "progress" in history needs to be revised. It is a compelling demand brought to the surface by anthropological research work, and completed, though in another field of study, by Thomas Kuhn's famous book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970).

Books of the new paradigm rely on a huge stock of previously unpublished sources and manuscripts to explore questions left in silence by earlier generations of historians: race relations and violence. New concepts are introduced, old terms gain new working definitions: legal and political anomalies demand redefining who an Aborigine is,³² what "freedom" is, what "possession" means. Most significantly, the British "occupation" of Australia is redefined to imply invasion or conquest. Accounts of "peaceful settlement" are discredited. The chronology of the history of the continent is expanded to 40,000 BP (more recently to c. 100,000 BP) and books treat this period accordingly: 1788 is not a starting date any longer. The new paradigm brings a new perspective, that of the other side of the frontier. Young researchers come from outside the prestigious Melbourne or Sydney schools, most often from the northern regions where racial tension is the most acute. They often serve the shocking new facts in a passionate style. Not only the facts, but also the accompanying language is often deliberately shocking:

The Aboriginal has been 'written out' of Australian history; the tragic significance of conflicts have long been bowdlerized and forgotten. Yet, even if vicariously, our guilt remains, as does our responsibility.

³⁰ Kenneth Maddock. *The Australian Aborigines: A Portrait of their Society*. Sociology and Anthropology series. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1975, p. ix.

³¹ Kenneth Maddock, p. 181.

³² C.D. Rowley, pp. 341-342.

Aboriginal attitudes take on a new dimension in the light of history, and no policies should be formulated except in that light. This is a book to stir the sleeping white Australian conscience.³³

The authors find it important to classify their predecessors historiographically so as to define their own position. Raymond Evans distinguishes two groups: conservatives and attackers. Looking up the references attached to the representative names in the endnotes, one can come to an interesting, though not too surprising, conclusion. The publication dates belonging to the works of the conservative group give the following sequence: 1964, 1966, 1966, and 1966. The attacks are dated 1970, 1972 and 1973. Since there is a clear caesura observable between these two groups of dates, Evans' volume supports my conclusion that the paradigm-shift in Australian historiography began around the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s.

The products of new research are dressed into new outfit. Tell-tale visible features such as book covers, typeface, publishing series, titles and headings disclose the content. Covers portray Aboriginal Australians, scenes of contact on the frontier, or patterns of Aboriginal art. The word "Aboriginal" cannot go without capitalisation in any of its forms, what is more, "Australian Aborigines" are gradually referred to as "Aboriginal Australians." More recently "indigenous/Indigenous peoples" is becoming the neutral term, and individual tribal names like "Warlpiri," "Yolngu," "Koori," "Nyoongar," etc., are used to professionally and politically acknowledge diversity. New knowledge is first published in new series, such as *Sociology & Anthropology*, and *Race & Aboriginal Studies*. A substantial chapter on Aboriginal culture leads the sequence of events in general histories to provide foundation for an understanding of the consequent contact history. The proportion of writing on Aboriginal matters in such general histories does not go under 10%, and the topic is always very well indexed. Titles and headings display words like "invasion" and "dispossession" on the one hand, and "self-determination," "reconciliation," on the other.

The coming of the new historical paradigm was necessarily politicised, because it attacked the foundation stone of the existing legal and political order. Considerable political activity, journalism and public debate accompanied its intrusion into academia. The High Court's decision in *Mabo v. Queensland* (1992) and the subsequent *Commonwealth Native Title Act* (1993) declared conservative

³³ C.D. Rowley, back cover.

views of history untenable. Through these events, Aboriginal people officially entered the history of Australia, which caused a series of articles in *The Age* as a form of public debate between Geoffrey Blainey and Henry Reynolds. Since in Blainey's imagination, and in the narrative discourse he represents, Australia is "one nation – one continent,"³⁴ and the area of land is identified with the idea of nation, he opposes the Mabo decision on the basis of the following argument:

In that long north-south corridor of Aboriginal lands there are only a couple of gaps of any size [...]. If, in 10 or 50 years' time, the Aborigines should move towards self-determination, this corridor could be the nucleus of a nation. [...] If the possession of land was as vital to individual survival as in 1788, we could easily respect the plea that today's Aborigines be granted their share, even more than their share. But today the ownership of land is not vital for the survival of any Australian family.³⁵

In his answer, Henry Reynolds points out a major weakness of Blainey's argument which is based on a misinterpretation of the past and a purposeful unwillingness to acknowledge any simultaneous existence of Aboriginal and European histories:

[Blainey's] most substantial criticism of the court is that the six judges who affirmed the existence of common law native title did so by projecting the standards of the present on to the fundamentally different world of 1788. But nothing is further from the truth. There was a clear recognition in the practice and the law of the British Empire that indigenous people had a form of title to their land based on their prior occupation.³⁶

Henry Reynolds' career is one of the classic examples of the new history. It also illuminates how the study of history can shape the legal and political practices of a country.³⁷ Anthropology took the initiative in the field of studying history in the late 1960s, whereas the 1980s saw the new perception of history leading jurisprudence out of the maze of practical problems. Born as a Tasmanian,

³⁴ Geoffrey Blainey. "Land Rights for All." *Age*. 16 Nov. 1993, n.p.

³⁵ Geoffrey Blainey. "Land Rights," n.p.

³⁶ Henry Reynolds. "Laws of the British Empire Recognised Form of Native Title." *Age*. Nov. 1993, n.p.

³⁷ A coincidence is that Henry Reynolds' wife, Margareth Reynolds became a Senator for Queensland.

Reynolds spent most of his research career at James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland. He is the author of the prize-winning *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), as well as *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (1987), *The Law of the Land* (1987), and several other volumes, the most recent of which is *Why Weren't We Told?* (1999).³⁸ He was a member of the Ministerial Reference Group on Aboriginal Education, frequently provides informal advice on land rights claims, and has been a respected commentator on Aboriginal history in the media for many years. The exposition of his radical views in the media has made him a common target for conservatives in the general society. Recently he has been dealing with what is currently the most controversial question relating to *Mabo*: pastoral leases. It is largely to his findings that the *Wik* judgement (1998) acknowledged the non-extinguishment of native title on pastoral leases, which cover a large portion of the land of Australia. Therefore, the issue is of great legal and political consequence. It is also of great historical interest because pastoral leases were created by the policies of the colonial office in the 1840s.

Reynolds' critical stance in historiography has been noted from the very beginning of his academic career.³⁹ C.D. Rowley's work inspired younger historians, including him and Raymond Evans, to address the themes of white violence and Aboriginal actions. Reynolds argued for a variety of Aboriginal strategies – resistance, accommodation and appropriation – in the face of the European presence. His most famous work, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, was first published by James Cook University, Townsville in 1981. Another expert in the field, Richard Broome writes that it is

a classic work which revealed how the traditional ideas of reciprocity, sorcery, exchange, and so forth, shaped the active and varied responses of Aboriginal people to Europeans on the frontier. This work dispelled the

³⁸ Henry Reynolds. *Why Weren't We Told? A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1999.

³⁹ "One academic historian, Henry Reynolds has, however, recently attacked head-on those who have written 'the Aborigines [*sic*] out of our history [...] [and] also written out much of the violence,' in a short, though illuminating article entitled 'Violence, the Aborigines [*sic*] and the Australian Historian.' He has since supported this challenge with a thoughtfully chosen selection of documents, which, along with Rowley's chapter in *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, pays particular attention to race relations in Queensland for the first time. He is especially critical – and understandably so – of Ward's conception of a frontier without firearms and quotes examples from Queensland to show that it was 'never safe to go unarmed,'" writes Raymond Evans, p. 35.

passive image of Aboriginal people and brought them to the centre of frontier history.⁴⁰

The front cover of the book deserves deeper analysis. It displays an etching presumably from the early nineteenth century ("Aborigines surprised by Camels," without date), which shows two groups of people facing each other in the bush, the Australian frontier. Aboriginal men are standing with their back to the observer of the picture, facing the group of pioneering white men with their camels and packages. The blacks are holding their boomerangs still but ready to protect their women and everything that may be behind their back, though the picture does not show more. The observer unconsciously assumes the blacks' point of view. One is obliged to see the frontier from the Aboriginal perspective, because the perspectives of the picture force one to. This is "the other side of the frontier," meaning another perspective, as well as another interpretation of frontier history. As a sign of change between 1965 and 1981, it is worth mentioning that, in spite of their enormous conceptual differences, both Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* and Henry Reynolds' *The Other Side of the Frontier* were awarded the Ernest Scott Prize for the most distinguished work in Australian, New Zealand and the Colonial Pacific history.

Although the caesura between the two paradigms of history was obviously in the early 1970s, I suggest that the actual change of the paradigm was sanctioned by the decision of the High Court of Australia in *Mabo v. Queensland* in 1992. In social sciences, the changing of a paradigm is not the achievement of a single person, and thus it is very difficult to define when it began. It is always a long process. Something started in the 1970s that came to its close with the *Mabo* decision, which gave the legal verdict: a new paradigm was born. It belongs to the nature of paradigms that their change never comes without a sign. A growing number of inextricable anomalies precedes the change of the old pattern which, therefore, needs to be adjusted to answer the problems. In a period of crisis the new kind of solutions that come from outsiders or "attackers" challenge the paradigm in power. The change comes at a moment when the new framework provoked by the various new solutions becomes capable of answering most of or all the anomalies, and so eventually it becomes recognised, accepted and acknowledged. This happened with the *Mabo* and *Native Title* legislation, which legalised the change. In the meanwhile, books projecting conservative views and

⁴⁰ Richard Broome. "Historians, Aborigines and Australia: Writing the National Past." *In the Age of Mabo*. Ed. Bain Attwood, p. 69.

silences in their narratives were republished several times by major publishing houses and re-edited by their authors. Works with opposing views about European-Aboriginal relations were published side by side in the decades between 1970-1990, even as late as in the 1980s.

What is the nature of this new paradigm, then? At the most fundamental level it is characterised by the return of an Aboriginal past which had been suppressed by the dominant history through the means of silencing and disremembering. The "return of the Aborigine" to the history of Australia has profound consequences. It destroys the myth of "the youngest continent" by dramatically changing the chronology of Australian history, as well as the role of its protagonists: Aborigines become the first discoverers of Australia instead of Europeans. The past three decades have seen an enormous growth of interest among Aborigines in history, resulting in a discourse now commonly known as Aboriginal History. Among other things, this includes oral histories recorded by elderly people, younger Aborigines expressing their past in the field of arts, and Aboriginal spokespersons proclaiming rights of ownership to the aboriginal past.⁴¹ Bain Attwood summarises the essence of the change in powerful words:

it undermines the theory of peaceful settlement as well as the notions of British justice, humanitarianism and egalitarianism which were central to the Australian nationhood and identity constructed by the earlier history.⁴²

The political solution that the old paradigm gave to the anomalies was protection, paternalism, and assimilation. Inaugurated by the Keating government (1991-1996),⁴³ the new solution is Reconciliation: the official policy concerning Aboriginal relations, which involves a healing integration, if not a peace treaty, between the two cultures. Many Australians now believe that the understanding of their common past holds the key to Australia's future. The *Mabo* decision and

⁴¹ See, for example, Labumore (E. Roughsey), *An Aboriginal Mother Speaks of the Old and the New*. Eds. P. Memmott and R. Horsman. Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1984; J. Davis and Mudrooroo Narogin et al., eds. *Paperbark: a collection of Black Australian writings*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990; paintings by Gordon Bennett; J. Ryan, *Mythscape: Aboriginal art of the desert* and *Paint Up Big: Warlpiri women's art of Lajamanu*. National Gallery of Victoria; Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*. The list is by no means complete.

⁴² Bain Attwood. "Mabo," p. 104. For the Australian self-image, see Russel Ward. *The Australian Legend*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1958.

⁴³ Note that Prime Minister Paul Keating's speechwriter was a historian, Don Watson.

the *Native Title Act* of 1993 have justified this belief. The emerging new paradigm of history cannot be dismissed simply as a “black armband view of history,”⁴⁴ to raise a feeling of guilt in the white Australian public. Its implications are much deeper than that. I firmly believe that the unfavourable political changes since 1996 (John Howard’s conservative Liberal/National Coalition government, or Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party) will not reverse the new paradigm. Nationalist and chauvinist political voices can reiterate obsolete views, but they do not bring up new anomalies and do not ask for new solutions. The new paradigm rewrote Aborigines into Australia’s past to enable them, as well as non-indigenous people cope with the future. By 1992 a scientific revolution changed the historical view of the academic community in which it occurred. The changing paradigm necessarily effected the contents and structure of textbooks and research works. In 1992 Aboriginal Studies was introduced into the school curriculum to educate further generations in accordance with policies on social justice and equity. A new generation of children may puzzle their curious parents with matter-of-fact answers, stating: “Well, we can do it [the school assignment] about anything, I thought I might do it on the white invasion!”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Blainey’s coinage “to describe the trend in Australian historiography toward focusing on hitherto neglected aspects of the country’s various histories of oppression.” Kerryn Goldsworthy. “‘Ordinary Australians’: Discourses of Race and Nation in Contemporary Australian Political Rhetoric.” *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered: Maintaining a Monocultural Tradition in a Multicultural Society*. Ed. Adi Wimmer. Tübingen: Stauffen Verlag, 1999, p. 220.

⁴⁵ Fr Frank Brennan SJ’s 9-year-old niece in Scrine, Gil, dir. *Talking Native Title & Reconciliation: Aboriginal and White Australians Speak Out*. Bendigo, Vic.: Video Education Australia, 1997.