

The Menzies Lecture 2009

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Narrating the Nation in Australia

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The Menzies Lecture is one of two major public lectures organised each year by the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies. It is designed to provide an opportunity for a distinguished person, of any nationality, to reflect on a subject of contemporary interest affecting Britain and Australia.

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Narrating the Nation in Australia*

Professor Graeme Davison

Menzies Lecture

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Nations, Benedict Anderson famously observed, are 'imagined communities', alive in the popular mind even before they become nationalist movements or nation-states.¹ Their imaginative reach is wide, embracing the present, the past and the future. In the present-day, nations are realised as print and electronic media engage far-flung nationals in a shared imaginative life. Nations may also be projected into a future where their divisions are healed and their unity is made perfect. 'She is not yet', the Australian poet James Brunton Stephens began his federation anthem, predicting that the 'viewless stream of Common Will'

* I am grateful to Carl Bridge and the Board of the Menzies Centre for the invitation to deliver this lecture and to Frank Bongiorno and John Hirst for comments on an earlier draft. I also wish to record my thanks to Mark Brett whose writings and generous responses to my inquiries inform the discussion of biblical narratives.

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983 and later editions.

would carry the emergent nation towards its destiny.² But, crucially, nations are products of an imagined past – a legacy of histories, folk traditions and myths that tell how this special community came into being. Among the main purposes of these narratives are: to provide a sense of continuity and common identity, to account for the nation's distinctive virtues, to invoke the legitimacy of divine providence, and to give momentum to its hopes.

A century ago Australians constructed their sense of national identity (they would have said 'character') around inherited concepts of ethnicity, race and religion. They were British, White and Christian. But as nations become more diverse, both racially and religiously, they depend more than ever upon stories to bind them together. At the beginning of his historical-fantasy *Australia* the film director, Baz Luhrmann, makes the young Aboriginal Nullah say: 'Grandfather teach most important lesson of all: Tellem story.' Telling stories is what gives nations their identity. They are communities united, and sometimes divided, by narratives.

If you examine these narratives of national becoming you quickly discover that they share some strong family resemblances. Each draws on a common stock of master-narratives or myths, deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian and

Classical traditions.³ These master narratives were so familiar to most nineteenth-century readers, and the spiritual principles they illustrated – ideas of foundation and legitimization, emancipation and redemption, covenant and sacrifice – were so taken for granted, that they hardly needed to be mentioned. They subsisted, as a kind of invisible architecture, giving shape to the raw experience of national history. Even the most empirical of historians, Raphael Samuel observes, 'will take on, without knowing it, the deep structures of mythic thought.'⁴ The antiquity of these master-narratives was part of their power. In colonial societies they imparted a sacred aura to histories that were more recent and profane.

Post-modernists argue that master-narratives are now obsolete, a relic of outmoded modernist ways of thinking.⁵ Others regard them as pernicious, giving credence to utopian fantasies of secular salvation.⁶ Yet they have a tenacious hold on our imagination. As the philosopher Charles Taylor persuasively argues: 'Far from being passé, these master narratives are essential to our thinking. We all wield them, including those

² Agnes Heller, 'European Master Narratives about Freedom', in G. Delanty (ed.), *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory*, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 257-65.

³ Raphael Samuel, 'Epic History: The Idea of Nation' in his *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain, Theatres of Memory*, volume II, Verso, London, 1998, p. 14.

⁴ See for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition' in Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 36-38.

⁵ John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Penguin, London, 2007.

² J.B. Stephens, 'The Dominion of Australia: A Forecast' (1899) as quoted in John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p. 16.

who claim to repudiate them.⁷ Since we cannot do without them, our objective should be to examine where they come from and how they shape our future, as well as our past.

National historians are mostly nationals of the country they study, and often nationalists too. They tend to see their own nation as unique. It is only when we place national myths and histories side by side, and examine their structural features and unifying themes, that their essential similarity becomes apparent. In this lecture, I seek to characterise the repertoire of nationalising narratives that influence history-making in settlement societies; identify their characteristic expressions and tendencies; and suggest some of the ways in which they have been utilised in narrative paintings, public statuary, museum exhibits, national commemorations, national songs and other forms of popular history.⁸ These are the most rudimentary, as well as the most influential, versions of national history. By comparing Australia's national narratives with those of the United States, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa we are better able to appreciate what is actually distinctive about the way we use them.

In the culture of settler societies, several powerful narrative forms recur, which I call, for short, the Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy and Peaceable Kingdom narratives.⁹ As their

⁷ *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2007, p. 573.

⁸ This essay extends ideas sketched in Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 56-79.

⁹ See Mark G. Brett, 'Nationalism and the Hebrew Bible' in John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies and M. Daniel Carroll (eds), *The Bible in Ethics*:

names suggest, these narratives were deeply rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. I will also discuss a fifth such narrative drawn from the classical tradition – the myths of heroic journeying exemplified by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – and will ponder why, in the form of the Anzac legend, they have recently become the dominant narrative of national becoming in Australia.

Sacred Myths & Secular History.

Britain, the land from which most Australian colonists had come, was constituted as a nation largely through the influence of the Protestant religion. As Linda Colley has argued in her influential book, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, 'Protestantism determined how most Britons viewed their politics. And an uncompromising Protestantism was the foundation on which their state was explicitly and unapologetically based.' The Bible and the printing press became the great engines of British nationalism, generating and disseminating a conception of the nation as a holy community led and protected by God. Central to the Protestant, and especially to the Calvinist, way of interpreting the Bible was the use of typologies or analogies between the figures and events in sacred scripture and those of contemporary history. This biblical vision of the nation long survived the time of its origin. As Colley notes: 'An apocalyptic

The Second Sheffield Colloquium, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1995, pp. 136-163 and idem., *Decolonising God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, Sheffield, 2009.

interpretation of history in which Britain stood in for Israel and its opponents were represented as Satan's accomplices, did not fade away in the face of rationalism in the late seventeenth century, but remained part of the thinking of many devout Protestants long after.¹⁰ Other historians argue that ideas of the nation as a chosen people continued to shape British national consciousness well into the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries,¹¹ and not just in Britain, but in other societies where the Calvinist influence ran deep, such as the United States, South Africa and Ulster.¹² In many of these countries, colonisation proceeded hand in hand with the proselytising activity of Christian churches and missions. As a consequence, knowledge of the biblical narratives often survived in the collective memory of the colonised even longer than it did in the minds of the colonisers.

In his illuminating book *Exodus and Revolution*, the American political theorist Michael Walzer argues that, in spite of the

¹⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992, Note Bene edition 2005, pp. 18, 31.

¹¹ Hugh McLeod, 'Protestantism and British National Identity, 1815-1945', in Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (eds.) *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, pp. 44-70; Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, passim; Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003; Clifford Longley, *Chosen People: the big idea that shaped England and America*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 2002; Ian Bradley, *Believing in Britain The Spiritual Identity of 'Britishness'*, I.B. Taurus, London, NY, 2007.

¹² Donald Harman Akenson, *God's People: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992.

secularisation of Western societies over the past two centuries, biblical narratives like the Exodus continue to shape political thinking:

The Exodus, or later reading of the Exodus, fixes the pattern. And because of the centrality of the Bible in Western thought and the endless repetition of the story, the pattern has been etched deep into our political culture. It isn't only the case that events fall, almost naturally, into an Exodus shape; we work actively to give them that shape. We complain about oppression; we hope (against the odds of human history) for deliverance; we join covenants and constitutions; we aim at a new and better social order. Though in attenuated form, Exodus thinking seems to have survived the secularisation of political theory.¹³

The Calvinist presence in colonial Australia was less pervasive than in the United States, for example, but a presence nevertheless. In her wonderful history of the Victorian Western District, a region settled in the 1830s and 40s by lowland Scottish sheep farmers, Margaret Kiddle reminds us of how familiar its pioneers were with the idiom of the Old Testament:

One book at least they knew. The Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, was with them every day of the week, and not only at Sunday homestead prayer. Most of them had little need to refer to it, for they could recite chapter after chapter by heart. Biblical

¹³ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, Basic Books, New York, 1985, p. 134. As I discuss below, Walzer's thesis, and especially its normative application to the contemporary politics of the United States and Israel, has drawn criticism. For the moment, all I wish to assert here is that such thinking has been a powerful, if often subliminal, influence on the imagination of many nations.

rhythms are often heard in the phrases of the most literate. [She cites the example of Niel Black] a man of passion and imagination and with a considerable literary gift, who best feels and expresses the influence of the Old Testament. Again and again he cries from the Australian wilderness with a prophetic voice. The repetition of the word 'wilderness' in his letters, as in the letters of others is no accident; for in the early years of settlement these men alone against the elements identified themselves with the men of Hebrew history who like themselves had lived in a dry land and guarded their flocks from many dangers.¹⁴

In imagining themselves as Hebrews advancing into the wilderness and standing against the elements (and against the ancestral occupants of the land) the European settlers were also invoking the sense of divine purpose first vouchsafed to the patriarchs of Israel.

Protestant clergymen, like John West, John Dunmore Lang and James Jeffers, were among the first to articulate a vision of Australia's national destiny, often clothing their sense of colonising mission in biblical imagery. In poems written during his voyage to New South Wales in 1825, Lang returned again and again to the figure of Abraham and his journey to the Promised Land.¹⁵ Approaching the centenary of European settlement, the Congregationalist minister James Jeffers likened his fellow White Australians to a chosen people who had been

¹⁴ Margaret Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday: A Social History of the Western District of Victoria*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1961, p. 502.

¹⁵ See especially 'The God of Abraham' in Lang, *Aurora Australis, or Specimens of Sacred Poetry for the Colonists of Australia*, G. Eager, Sydney, 1826, p. 5.

brought across the watery wilderness to this land of promise, a land of favourable climate and fertile soil, with lofty mountains and deep cleft valleys, with rivers and streams and subterranean waters, a land of inexhaustible wealth, with corn like that of Egypt, with grapes like that of Eschol, with boundless plains for our sheep and a thousand hills for our cattle.¹⁶

In the eyes of many later observers, Australia was a strikingly secular society. The leaders of its nineteenth-century nationalist movement were often republicans and freethinkers. But while their beliefs were secular, the forms in which they clothed them, and even their underlying rationale, owed much to the symbolism of the Bible and the religious outlook in which they had been reared. As Benedict Anderson reminds us, nationalism has to be understood, not just in terms of the self-conscious political ideologies of its advocates, but also of the 'cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being.'¹⁷

On the eve of Federation, the Australian literary nationalist, A.G. Stephens, reflected on the relationship between the apparent decay of religion and the prospects of the new nation. 'In the religious sense, probably nineteen-twentieths of Australians are heathen', he observed. 'Our fathers, or their fathers, or some of them, had the kernel of religion; we in Australia have little

¹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 January 1888 as quoted in Walter Phillips, *James Jeffers: Prophet of Federation*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 1993, p. 170 and compare Graeme Davison, 'Centenary Celebrations' in Davison, J.W. McCarty and Ailsa McLeary (eds), *Australians 1888*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney, 1987, pp. 1-29.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 19.

more than the husk, and we shall have less and less husk as the years go by.' Yet while the Australians had lost religion, they had not yet adapted themselves to its loss:

In many of the most memorable episodes of history it infused into the veins of nations a courage and a strength which we have not yet quite attained without it. For the Covenanters, for the Puritans, for the little Dutch republic fighting for its life against overwhelming Spain as that other little Dutch republic [the Boers] is today fighting for its life against over-whelming Britain, it edged the sword of patriotism and sharpened the pike of liberty.¹⁸

Stephens was an ardent freethinker but he imported something of the religious fervour of his Calvinist Welsh and Scottish forefathers into his ardent nationalism. The sense of divine destiny that imbued the Fathers of Australian Federation, many of whom shared similar religious backgrounds, may be viewed as the displacement of impulses originally religious into the public and political sphere. The scaffolding of biblical narrative traditions, the cultural system from which secular nationalism had emerged, may have been less visible in Australia, but it may have been just as formative as it was in countries where it lay closer to the surface of public life. Was it the husk or the kernel of Australian nationalism?

¹⁸ A.G. Stephens, 'For Australians' (*Bulletin* 1899) in Leon Cantrell (ed.), *A.G. Stephens: Selected Writings*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1977, p. 395.

Genesis

The primary narrative of colonisation is the book of Genesis, a story that begins with God's covenant with the patriarch Abraham:

Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.¹⁹

Here, in a kernel, are the ideas that made the Genesis story such a powerful myth among all spiritual descendants of Abraham, Christians and Muslims as well as Jews. Genesis aligns a history of discovery and territorial conquest with a divine plan; it promises that the patriarch will be fruitful and that his seed will multiply; and it foretells that his reputation will increase and that he and his people will be protected from their enemies. In seeking new lands European colonists invoked a similar covenant. In the monuments and ceremonies they first devised to represent their nationhood, a special significance attaches to the commemoration of moments of departure and arrival, and to the heroic acts of the colonial Abrahams who led them through the perils of the journey to a new land.

Most new nations had such foundation narratives built around such features as a heroic group of discoverers or explorers,

¹⁹ Genesis 12:1

a patriarchal leader endowed with special vision and courage, a great voyage or journey, a symbolic moment of arrival and a founding act. The pioneers of European conquest in the New World, Vasco da Gama and Christopher Columbus, were often depicted as saints, heroes of the faith, as well as conquerors. The Catholic founders of French Canada, Cartier, Maisonneuve and Champlain, had marked their landfall by the raising of a Cross, a symbol that continued to appear in monuments to French Canadian discoverers well into the nineteenth century.²⁰ It was only in the 1790s, after the American War of Independence, that Columbus emerged as the focus of a new American foundation myth, supplanting the British founders of Virginia in the national imagination, and gradually acquiring the more secular character evident in the murals painted by John Vanderlyn for the Capitol building in Washington.²¹

Even more important to the new American nation was the 1620 voyage of the English Puritan settlers of New England, the Pilgrim Fathers as they have become known. The founders of Massachusetts had explicitly invoked the precedent of ancient Israel in justification of their settlement. 'As the ancient patriarchs . . . removed from straighter places into more roomy, where the land lay idle and waste, and none used it, though

²⁰ Alan Gordon, *Making Public Past: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 2001, pp. 98-101.

²¹ Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero*, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1992, p. 136.

there dwelt inhabitants by . . . so it is lawful now to take a land which none useth, and make use of it. . . ', declared the Puritan divine Robert Cushman.²² The story of the expulsion of the Puritans from England to Holland, their embarkation for America, their landing on the New England Coast at the place marked symbolically by Plymouth Rock, and their first year of near-starvation terminated by the first harvest, an event now commemorated by America's most important national holiday, Thanksgiving, merges national and sacred history in a characteristically American way. Plymouth Rock, as historians have shown, was essentially a nineteenth-century myth, created two centuries after the event by New England intellectuals to give symbolic form to events they recognised as foundational.²³

Australia's Abraham was the famous British explorer James Cook, whose landing at Kurnell on Botany Bay was sometimes compared by later writers to the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth. 'As the Plymouth Rock is the most sacred ground to the Americans, so may this historic place, rich in its traditions, be the one place in our island continent more consecrated than another to the great man who first set foot upon our shores, and in his foresight, secured for the empire, our country and our

²² Robert Cushman, *Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing out of England into the Parts of America* (1622), as quoted in Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1985, p. 44.

²³ John Seelye, *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1998; Robert D. Arner, 'Plymouth Rock Revisited: The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers', *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 6, no. 4, Winter 1983, pp. 25-35.

people, a territory unsurpassed in the whole universe', declared local member Joseph Carruthers when the site was set aside as a public reserve on the eve of Australian federation in 1899.²⁴ At a time when the Australians were conscious of following in America's path, it seemed only natural that they should have their own Plymouth Rock.²⁵

Similar founding acts by other colonial Abrahams were commemorated throughout the New World, although historians often had to massage the facts of history in order to produce founders with the appropriate patriarchal virtues. In the hands of Afrikaner historians, Jan van Riebeeck, the opportunistic Dutch East India Company captain who founded the settlement on the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, was remade into a good Calvinist imbued with a divine calling.²⁶ British Canadians created a foundation myth around the figure of John Cabot, a Genoese mariner in the service of England's Henry VII who, they claimed, had set foot on the American continent in 1497, even before Columbus had reached the American mainland. But both the chronology and geography of the Cabot voyages were obscure. His famous landfall could have been on the shores of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia or even of Maine.²⁷

²⁴ *Dedication of Captain Cook's Landing Place Kurnell, Botany Bay, November 1899*, p. 32.

²⁵ Graeme Davison, 'Victorian Genesis: Founding Histories', *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 80, no. 2, Issue 271, October 2009, pp. 191-211.

²⁶ C. Louis Liepoldt, *Jan van Riebeeck: A Biographical Study*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1936, pp. 101-6.

²⁷ Peter E. Pope, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1997, pp. 46, 71-86.

French Canadians traced an alternative lineage from Jacques Cartier, who had landed on Gaspé Peninsula at the mouth of the St Lawrence in 1534, erected a cross and claimed the continent in the name of His Most Christian Majesty Francis I of France. Yet Cartier's reputation as a founder of New France dates mainly from the time of Canadian federation in the mid-nineteenth century when Quebec historians began to advance his claims as a rival to Cabot.²⁸

The Genesis narrative was the paradigm of national myth-making in the age of empire. The new nation came into being through the sending forth of its putative father. Painters often symbolised the discoverer's patriarchal character by depicting him standing high in the prow of a ship, or at the head of a line of followers, representatives of the long and fruitful lineage that he would establish. Each of the other nations of European settlement recapitulated such founding moments, usually visualised as a first landing with its attendant acts of dedication or possession – the raising of the Cross or flag, the reading of a proclamation, the firing of a ceremonial volley of shots, the laying out of the first street plan.

Compared with the colonising acts of other European colonies, the foundation of British Australia is notable for its secular character. At Sydney Cove the arrival of the First Fleet was marked by the planting of the British flag, followed a day or two later by what seems almost like an ironical inversion of the founding act of the Pilgrim Fathers when the convict chaplain

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-113.

Rev. Richard Johnson addressed his flock of prisoners on the text 'What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits toward me?' In 1836 the freer and more virtuous South Australians assembled under an arched gum tree to hear their Governor John Hindmarsh read a proclamation: the anniversary of the day was long celebrated in South Australia as Proclamation Day while the tree became a symbol of the plantation of the new colony and of the ever-spreading branches of its founding families.²⁹ In Western Australia, on the other hand, the founding moment in 1829 was marked, not by preserving a tree, but by cutting one down, a first gesture towards the process of clearing and settling the wilderness. For a long while the study of Australian history was almost synonymous with the history of discovery and exploration. These voyages, as the historian Ernest Scott remarked, were 'chapters in our colonial Book of Genesis'.³⁰ They were the seed for a family of foundation and settlement narratives, including the 'pioneer legend', a myth of territorial conquest that, as John Hirst observes, depicted its heroes as 'subduing the land and battling the elements'.³¹

At any time between the 1860s and the 1960s, versions of the Genesis narrative were an integral part of national consciousness in lands of British settlement. The re-enactment of the voyage

²⁹ Jim Davidson, 'The Rise and Fall of Proclamation Day', *Meanjin*, vol. 51, no. 4, Summer 1992, pp. 795-6.

³⁰ Ernest Scott, 'The Administration of Captain Lonsdale', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 6, September 1918, p. 155.

³¹ J.B. Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 71, October 1978, pp. 316-337.

of the Mayflower in 1960, the Cook Bicentenary celebrations of 1970 and the dedication of the Grahamstown 1820 Settlers Monument in 1974 were among the last unchallenged expressions of the idea. From the mid-1970s, however, it came under growing critical scrutiny. More recent anniversaries, such as the Bicentenary of the foundation of British settlement in Australia in 1988, the sesquicentenary of official British settlement in New Zealand in 1990 and the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage in 1992, have provoked more sustained attacks, primarily in the name of indigenous or other colonised peoples, though with support from many others, including feminists and environmentalists. On each of those occasions, the commemoration arguably served the interests of the protesters as much those of celebrants. In 1988 the Aboriginal elder Burnam Burnam travelled to London to 'take possession' of Great Britain while other protesters threw an effigy of the first Governor of New South Wales, Arthur Phillip, into Sydney Harbour. In 1992, the year of the Columbus Quincentenary, children at a summer camp in Ohio staged a pageant entitled 'Undoing Columbus' in which the great navigator stepped ashore swinging his sword and began to strike down trees, animals, Indians and other living things. The audience booed and sang 'Mean old Columbus, nasty, nasty

Columbus' until at last the interloper called out 'I give up' and the slain creatures miraculously returned to life.³²

Despite these challenges, the Genesis narrative has not died, but has been re-born in more pluralist and democratic forms.³³ Under this new dispensation, the nation is no longer inaugurated by the single founding act of a great white Father, but by the voyages of all the immigrants, whatever their racial and ethnic origins, who have come to people the new land. This pluralist re-working of the Genesis narrative has generated its own distinctive symbols and rituals, the voyage of Tall Ships and the Wall of Honour at Ellis Island, which have now become incorporated at similar sites of memory in other settler societies. In New Zealand, voyaging is an experience that unites Maori and Pakeha. On the waterfront of New Zealand's capital, Wellington, a tall statue depicts the legendary Maori 'explorer' Kupe Raiatea, his wife and a *rohunga* (or priestly expert) at the moment of the first sighting of Aotearoa New Zealand. In Australia, on the other hand, even a pluralist reworking of the Genesis narrative does not include everyone. The most popular version of the myth is Bruce Woodley's song, written for the Bicentenary of 1988:

We are one, but we are many,
And from all the lands of earth we come

³² Stephen J. Summerhill and John Alexander Williams, *Sinking Columbus: Contested History, Cultural Politics and Mythmaking during the Quincentenary*, University of Florida, Tampa, 2000, p. 2.

³³ *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000, chapter 4.

We'll share a dream and sing with one voice
I am, you are, we are Australian.

To meet Aboriginal concerns, Woodley added a new stanza that begins: 'We came from the Dreamtime'. But 'the Dreamtime' is not like other homelands, located by standard coordinates of space and time. A myth of national becoming based on the experience of voyaging cannot easily embrace a people who believe that they have always been here.

Exodus

The Genesis narrative is a story of exploration, triumph over the forces of nature, the possession of a new land, the foundation of a lineage. By implication it was also a story of the subjugation of the original inhabitants of the conquered land. The Exodus, or Mosaic, narrative, on the other hand, is a story of captivity and deliverance, a journey from slavery and exile into a land of promise. 'So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said to him: "Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews . . . Let my people go, so that they may worship me." (Exodus 10:3) As the story of a captive people yearning to live free, its primary appeal was to the oppressed rather than their oppressors, or even their liberators.

The passage of the people of Israel from Egypt through the Red Sea to the Promised Land is the master narrative that, as Michael Walzer argues, shapes many modern freedom rides, from the anti-slavery movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth

century, and the civic rights movement of the twentieth century to the anti-apartheid movement. American revolutionaries sometimes likened their leader, George Washington, to Moses, and his apparently miraculous triumph over the British military to the Israelites' conquest of the Egyptians. On one face of the first design for the Seal of the United States, devised by Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Andrews, Pharaoh in an open chariot pursues the Israelites; while on the other, Moses, stands on the opposite shore, arms outstretched, as his enemies drown in the waters of the Red Sea under the motto: 'Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.'³⁴

From the first, however, the Exodus narrative jarred with one crucial aspect of American experience, for while the American Revolution brought deliverance to the White colonists, their Black slaves remained in captivity. Soon it was their turn to claim the Mosaic promise of emancipation. As Eugene Genovese and other historians of slave culture have shown, Moses and Jesus often merged in the minds of black Americans into a composite figure of both temporal and spiritual deliverance.³⁵ The African American spiritual 'Go Down Moses', made famous by Paul Robeson, simultaneously narrates the Exodus story and gives voice to a cry for freedom in the present.

³⁴ Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987, p. 29.

³⁵ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Vintage Books, New York, 1972, pp. 252-3.

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land
Tall old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

Before the Pilgrims became Fathers, according to the American version of the Genesis narrative, they were refugees, victims of religious persecution in their English homeland. For black Americans, however, the Exodus narrative took on a new significance. In his book *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth Century Black America* Eddie Glaude observes:

The image of America as the New Canaan is reversed within African American political re-enactments of the Exodus story. We are still the New Israelites, but the United States is Egypt, and the seat of Pharaoh is in Washington DC.³⁶

A similar re-appropriation of the Exodus narrative is apparent in the history of modern South Africa. The Afrikaners, steeped in the Calvinism of the Dutch Reform Church, conceived their heroic journey to the Free State and the Transvaal as an Exodus journey from English captivity to the freedom of a Promised

³⁶ Eddie S Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth Century Black America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000, p. 48.

Land.³⁷ This is the foundational narrative that gave form to the most impressive monument of Afrikaner nationalism, the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, where the exhibits include Dutch Bibles, opened at the key passages in the Book of Exodus, and a tapestry depicting the crossing of the Red Sea. But now it is the black people of South Africa who have appropriated the Exodus story as the master narrative of their own symbolic journey from the captivity of apartheid to freedom. At the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, Bishop Desmond Tutu, who continued to have talks with Prime Minister P.W. Botha, audaciously compared himself to Moses, who, even in the midst of his people's oppression, continued to speak with Pharaoh.³⁸ In 1990, that Exodus struggle reached a memorable resolution when Nelson Mandela, often characterised as a black Moses in popular tradition,³⁹ took the last steps in his 'Long Walk to Freedom' from the prison of Robben Island to the presidency of post-Apartheid South Africa.

Aboriginal Australians, especially those influenced by Christian missions, had also found inspiration in the Exodus narrative, sometimes through the African American spirituals

³⁷ J. Alton Templin, *Ideology on a Frontier: The Theological Foundations of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652-1910*, Greenwood, Westport Conn., 1984, pp. 117-8.

³⁸ See Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Doubleday, London, 1999, p. 244; 'The Divine Imperative' in *The Rainbow People of God*, Doubleday, London, 1984, p. 73.

³⁹ Russell H. Kaschula, 'Myth and Reality in the New South Africa: Contemporary Oral Literature', <http://www2.uiniv-teunton.fr/~ageof/text/74c21e88-611.html>.

that became part of their own musical heritage and gave form to their own longing for a homeland.⁴⁰ One day they would also have their own Moses, the Torres Strait Islander Eddie (Koiki) Mabo whose successful application to the High Court in 1992 overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* and opened the way for Aboriginal people to reclaim lands taken by European colonists. Mabo had died in that same year and was buried in the Townsville cemetery but in 1996 his people, the Meriam, brought his body home to Murray Island for reburial. More than a century earlier the London Missionary Society had come to the island and the memorial service for Eddie blended Christian and traditional elements. '*Mama namarida Mose mara memegle e naosa gair mara omaskir Irraille*', the choir sang. 'You sent Moses your servant to lead the people of the Israelites from Egypt.' '*Ekuaida mama gurgub gur damrikie mari adgiriam ko abele*. By your blessing the waters parted because you are the way.' Eddie, his son explained, was the Moses who led his people from the captivity of *terra nullius*.⁴¹

Australia as a nation has experienced no similar moment of heroic deliverance. As one historian of Australian nationalism has suggested, we are still 'Waiting for the Revolution'.⁴² The first European settlers of Australia were British convicts,

⁴⁰ Bain Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, pp. 73-78.

⁴¹ Merrill Finlay, 'Eddie Mabo Comes Home', *Good Weekend*, 1 June 1996. I am grateful to Mark Brett for this reference.

⁴² Noel McLachlan, *Waiting for the Revolution: a history of Australian nationalism*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1989.

exiled for the good of their country rather than pilgrims fleeing oppression to a new land. Opponents of transportation, especially those influenced by the humanitarians, commonly likened it to slavery.⁴³ 'Transportation, though chiefly dreaded as exile, undoubtedly is much more than exile; it is slavery as well', the Molesworth Committee declared in 1838.⁴⁴ Convicts sometimes compared themselves with the captive Jewish people. 'Like the Egyptians and ancient Hebrews/we were oppressed under Logan's yoke', wrote Frank the Poet in his ballad 'Moreton Bay'.

Yet only one Australian colony came close to fully embracing the Exodus narrative. The founders of South Australia, who included English Dissenters and German Lutherans fleeing religious oppression, often compared the purity of their beginnings with the stained origins of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land.⁴⁵ Speakers at the annual commemorations of Proclamation Day paid tribute to 'the dauntless pioneers [who] founded and established a settlement where the mighty forces of religious and civil liberties could flourish in their fullest

favour'.⁴⁶ South Australia's Immigration Museum echoes this tradition. Under the banner 'The Promised Land', visitors may read a short account of 'The Great Exodus'. It explains that some immigrants to South Australia were 'exiles for religious and political reasons', though the majority, it tacitly admits, sought prosperity rather than liberty. As foremost historian of South Australia's origins, Douglas Pike, observed, 'the tradition of the Pilgrim Fathers was lauded but seldom followed.'⁴⁷

The Exodus narrative has three essential features: an experience of captivity and exile, a heroic struggle of resistance, and a moment of dramatic deliverance. Australia lacked all three, or did not have them to the degree required for a truly inspiring national myth. Its convict pioneers were exiles but not really captives. Its political evolution from open-air prisons to advanced democracies was gradual, more consistent with the assumptions of the Whig historians than the doctrines of French or American revolutionaries.⁴⁸ Its spokesman looked backwards to claim the rights of freeborn Englishmen – trial by jury, a free press, representative government – as much as forwards to create a New Britannia.⁴⁹ Australian radicals

⁴³ John Ritchie, 'Towards ending an unclean thing: The Molesworth Committee and the Abolition of Transportation to New South Wales, 1837-40', *Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 67, October 1976, pp. 144-5.

Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, Knopf, New York, pp. 282-4.

⁴⁴ Report of the Select Committee on Transportation, *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1837-8, vol. 22, p. 669.

⁴⁵ For example, John Stephens, *Land of Promise: being an authentic and impartial history of the rise and progress of... South Australia*, Smith Elder and Co, London, 1839.

⁴⁶ *The Day We Celebrate, Address by the Hon Sir Robert Nichols, MP, Old Gum Tree Proclamation Ceremony 28 December 1950*, Pioneers Association of South Australia.

⁴⁷ Douglas Pike, *Paradise of Dissent: South Australia 1829-1857*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1957, Second edition 1967, p. 47.

⁴⁸ On the Whig tradition see J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian historians and the English past*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 11-35.

⁴⁹ See, for example, the writings of Australian constitutional historians: A.C. V. Melbourne, *Early Constitutional Development in Australia*, University of

sometimes invoked the symbols of revolution – tricolours and liberty trees –⁵⁰ but, as John Hirst has persuasively argued, their democratic constitutions finally came without a popular mobilisation, without a struggle and without a crisis: in short without any of the elements to the Exodus narrative.⁵¹

The strongest believers in an Australian Exodus were radical republicans whose aspirations to national independence were shaped by expectations of apocalyptic, possibly violent, revolution. The republican Robert Thomson looked forward to a day when 1788 would become ‘a date that will be classed in the world’s history with the founding of Rome, the launching of the Pilgrim Fathers, or the storming of the Bastille’. There would be ‘but one greater day in our own Australia’s annals, and that will be the anniversary of the Declaration of her Independence.’⁵² But no such dramatic moment of deliverance arrived. Despite occasional clashes between colonists and British authorities, like the 1854 Eureka rebellion on the Ballarat goldfields, Australia remained within the British Empire. Its constitutional

Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1963; W.G. McMinn, *A Constitutional History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979.

⁵⁰ Peter Cochrane, *Colonial Ambition: Foundations of Australian Democracy*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2006 and Terry Irving, *The Southern Tree of Liberty: The Democratic Movements in New South Wales before 1856*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006.

⁵¹ John Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 271.

⁵² Robert Thomson, *Australian Nationalism – An Earnest Appeal to the Sons of Australia*, Sydney, 1888, p. 33.

separation from the British Crown has been a long-drawn out, rather than dramatic, process.⁵³

It is still incomplete. When an Australian republic comes, it will not be through a heroic struggle, but through exhaustion; not against the opposition of the British Crown but with its weary compliance. Even its advocates admit that the liberties the republic will bring are symbolic rather than real. Only if our national Exodus is somehow infused with new symbols – of a new ecological connection to the land, for example, or of reconciliation with its original inhabitants – will it acquire the necessary spiritual charge. ‘If a republic is to connect with people at the most fundamental level – our feeling for country and with one another – then the republic needs a narrative of purpose which explains its reason for coming into being’, writes its historian, Mark McKenna.⁵⁴

There is, besides, another, and perhaps more fundamental, source of discomfort with the Exodus narrative. It is a story of deliverance, not only *from* captivity, but also *to* a Promised Land. In the world of the Bible, as well as ours, the land promised to one people may already have been occupied by another. Just as the Israelites supplanted the Canaanites, so did the modern Israelis expel the Palestinians. In a searching critique of Walzer’s account of the Exodus narrative, the Palestinian

⁵³ See for example Geoffrey Robertson’s puzzlement about when Australia became constitutionally free: *The Statute of Liberty: How Australians Can Take Back Their Rights*, Vintage Books, Sydney, 2009, pp. 52–55.

⁵⁴ Mark McKenna, ‘The Nation Reviewed’, *The Monthly*, March 2008, pp. 10–16.

literary critic Edward Said argues that, despite its promise of liberation, its political implication has often been to legitimise dispossession and expulsion.⁵⁵ Following Said, Ann Curthoys argues that the mythology of Australian settler nationalism had a similar effect in erasing the presence of Australia's Canaanites, the Aborigines.⁵⁶ I am not sure whether Said's analysis, framed by the politics of Zionism and American imperialism, can be so confidently extended to Australia. This is not just because Australians are less inclined to consider themselves a Chosen People than Americans and Israelis, or because they have less reason to see themselves as exiles delivered into freedom (though both may be true), but because the potential of the Exodus narrative has also been as powerful, especially in recent times, in inspiring the liberation of the dispossessed as it had once been in legitimising their dispossession. The powerful impulses that drive the narrative – whether to conquest or freedom – do not themselves define how that narrative should be resolved. Perhaps this is why, in nation-making, the Genesis and Exodus narratives – stories of movement, liberation and struggle – have coexisted, sometimes uneasily, with other narrative traditions, also with Biblical antecedents, which express ideas of justice, convergence and reconciliation.

⁵⁵ Edward W. Said, 'Michael Walzer's "Exodus and Revolution": A Canaanite Reading', *Grand Street*, vol. 5, no. 39, Winter 1986, pp. 86-106; also Michael Walzer and Edward W. Said, 'An Exchange: Exodus and Revolution', *Grand Street*, vol. 5, no. 41, Summer 1986, pp. 246-259.

⁵⁶ Ann Curthoys, 'Whose Home? Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 61, 1999, pp. 1-18.

Deuteronomy

Nations are made, according to one such narrative, by the process of law-making, as the people is constituted 'under God' as a political nation. As Moses delivered the tablets of the Law from Mount Sinai, so the Fathers of the Constitution bestowed the fabric of just laws under which the people became a nation.

The first modern nations, the United States and France, honour the writers of the declarations of rights and constitutions that became their founding charters, often according them a 'sacred' character. The secular rituals and iconography of the French Revolution often drew inspiration from religious sources: so, for example, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was likened to the Ten Commandments and inscribed, like the Mosaic Law, on stone tablets.⁵⁷ According to its admirers, the Constitution of the United States, 'Our Ark of the Covenant', had a similar sacred character, evident in the philosophical and literary inspiration of its framers and its perfect adaptation to the requirements of a democratic people.⁵⁸ 'I am as perfectly

⁵⁷ As quoted in Jonathan Ribner, *Broken Tablets: The Cult of the Law in French Art from David to Delacroix*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, p. 1; on the sacred character of the French nation also see David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism 1680-1800*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 2001.

⁵⁸ Compare Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture*, Knopf, New York, 1987, pp. xviii, 17, 20. Some Jewish scholars have suggested that the Deuteronomic law actually offers precedents for aspects of American constitutional law: see for example, Bernard M. Levinson, 'The First Constitution: Rethinking the Origins of Rule of Law and Separation of Powers in the Light of Deuteronomy', *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, February 2006, pp. 1853-1888.

satisfied that the Union of the United States, in its form and adoption, is as much the work of a Divine Providence as any of the miracles recorded in the Old and New Testaments were the effects of a divine power', one of the first Chief Justices of the Supreme Court declared.⁵⁹

Nations like Australia and Canada, which emerged as dependencies of Great Britain, a nation without a written constitution, and took many years to obtain constitutions of their own, were ambivalent about this narrative of national becoming. Canadians, even more than Australians, have long struggled with the sense of being orphaned by history. The circumstances of the nation's birth, as a loyalist refuge from the United States, the persistent division between French and English Canada, the troubled history of the confederation, and the increasingly porous border with the United States, left Canadians without a single compelling foundation narrative. 'We cannot find our beginning', Robert Kroetsch confessed in 1977. 'There is no Declaration of Independence, no Magna Carta, no Bastille Day. We live in a terrible unease of not having begun.'⁶⁰ Kroetsch was writing in the midst of an acute national crisis, the threatened secession of Quebec from the confederation. Lacking a shared narrative of national becoming, Canada seemed unable to conceive a shared future.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁰ 'Canada is a Poem' in Gary Geddes (ed.), *Decided We Stand*, Peter Martin Associates, Toronto, 1977, p. 13.

In 2001 Australians commemorated the formal birth of the nation with the centenary of Federation. In advance publicity for the occasion, we were urged to feel ashamed of the fact, elicited by a nation-wide poll, that hardly one Australian schoolchild in ten could name the country's first prime minister. The historian John Hirst published a history of the federation movement, entitled *The Sentimental Nation*, that sought to restore a sense of high purpose to the origins of the Australian nation-state. 'God wanted Australia to be a nation', his book begins, and he goes on to chart the sense of divine destiny that animated the founding fathers of the nation. He reveals the innermost thoughts of Alfred Deakin – surely one of the most high-minded of our statesmen – who was convinced that in pursuing the federal cause he was reading the intent of the Almighty himself. He quotes stanza upon stanza of patriotic verse, some good but mostly bad, brimming with a sense of national destiny. This, he argues, was a patriotic conviction 'widely known and accepted'. Yet as he admits several chapters later, it was a conviction that did not last. 'The myth died hard', he writes, 'and with it all knowledge of federation. All the people, events and places that federalists declared would be historic never became so.'⁶¹

Why did this powerful narrative of national becoming not endure? The founding deeds of the United States, and the documents in which they were inscribed, live on largely through the power of the words themselves. America, Helen

⁶¹ John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p. 343.

Irving persuasively argues, was 'a nation built on words'.⁶² The Puritans were a people of the Word, and to this day, she suggests, Americans demonstrate an understanding of the power of rhetoric and a facility with language not found among their Australian cousins. 'American culture is profoundly scriptural [she writes]. Mastery of the word remains a key to power, both transient and lasting.' Australians, by contrast, are a laconic people, more at home doing than speaking. What is more, the words that the fathers of the American republic gave to their successors, and the high principles they enshrined, ring in the national imagination in a way that the more prosaic words of the Australian Constitution do not.

Could this symbolic void be filled, for example by the insertion in our Constitution of a Preamble or an Australian Bill of Rights, giving more stirring expression to the principles we hold in common? Would better words enable our national souls to sing? In 1999 Prime Minister John Howard commissioned Australia's leading poet, Les Murray, to draft a new preamble to the Australian Constitution, to be put to the Australian people in a referendum alongside a 'minimalist' proposal for an Australian republic. 'With hope in God', the text began, but its ostentatious avoidance of the issue of Aboriginal sovereignty, and its careful alternation between ideals of 'excellence' and 'fairness', 'independence' and 'mateship', owed more to political

calculation than divine inspiration. The voters sensed as much, and the Preamble was voted down, along with the republic. Murray was rueful: the episode was a 'waste of time' a 'sea of grief', 'a hurricane of vilification'.⁶³

Yet other settler nations had been more successful in breathing new life into old laws. In 1982, the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, sought to 'patriate' the Canadian Constitution, until then a series of Acts of the British Parliament. To give grandeur to the nation, and to establish a foundation on which French and English, White and Indigenous Canadians, might unite, Trudeau proposed that a new Charter of Canadian Rights should be inserted in the Constitution. Critics of the first drafts of the Charter objected to the 'heavy, wooden quality of [its] language and style'. There was political jockeying around the question of whether God should be mentioned in its preamble. It broke new no philosophical ground. It still has its critics.⁶⁴ Yet, in spite of all these shortcomings, it has become a popularly accepted symbol of the multiculturalism that is now the nation's defining ideal. 'Accommodating difference is what Canada is all about', says Charles Taylor. What defines its national 'soul' is not a tablet of unchanging laws but an ongoing conversation.⁶⁵ To advocates of an Australian Bill of Rights, the

⁶² Interview with Les Murray, ABC AM program, 8 November 1999, <http://www.abc.au/am/stories/s64708.htm>.

⁶⁴ Edward McWhinney, *Canada and the Constitution 1979-1982: Patriation and the Charter of Rights*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1982, pp. 53-58.

⁶⁵ Jeremy Webber, *Reimagining Canada: Language, Culture, Community and the Canadian Constitution*, McGill-Queens University Press, Kingston

⁶² 'A Nation Built on Words: The Constitution and National Identity in America and Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2009, pp. 211-225.

Canadian experience offers hope that the symbolic void at the heart of their nation could yet be filled.

The Peaceable Kingdom

In the Genesis narrative the nation is constituted patriarchally through the actions of a father-founder. In the Exodus narrative, it comes into being through a process of liberation, as a captive people pass from exile to freedom. The Deuteronomy narrative sees the nation as constituted through a sacred covenant of laws. Finally, under what I call the Peaceable Kingdom narrative, the nation is created through a process of reconciliation between potentially or previously opposing forces. The ideal of the Peaceable Kingdom, or Zion, is most powerfully evoked in the words of the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah:

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the leopard and the yearling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

This was the metaphor that inspired the remarkable allegorical painting by the Pennsylvania Quaker artist Edward Hicks, 'The Peaceable Kingdom' (c.1848), itself a rendering of the central political myth of the Quaker state, the celebrated but possibly mythical 1682 treaty between William Penn and the Delaware Indians.

and Montreal, 1994, pp. 309-320.

Hicks' painting incorporates the most famous contemporary image of the treaty, Benjamin West's narrative painting 'The Treaty of Penn with the Indians' (1771-2), but by placing it in an allegorical setting, denoted by lions, lambs and little children, it transforms history into explicit myth. Recent historians have found that the original treaty narrative was composed partly by Penn himself, almost twenty years after the event, and to be largely a theological rationalisation of events that were more drawn out and much less idealistically inspired, on both sides.⁶⁶ Hicks' painting and its prophetic source suggest the apocalyptic, future-orientation of this idea of national becoming: the peaceable kingdom is a vision of an ideal society rather than the story of a nation already in being. The imagery of Penn's treaty remains a discreet but still-powerful presence in the American mind. Visitors to the Smithsonian's Museum of the American Indian, opened in 2001, ascend the main staircase towards a contemporary statue, a stylised treaty tableau in which colonist and native exchange greetings under the shelter of a spreading oak tree, an iconographical echo of West's famous painting.

The Peaceable Kingdom narrative departs from the logic of other biblical narratives. Its direction is convergent or restorative rather than divergent and progressive. It moves from swords to ploughshares, from clenched fists to handshakes, from tumult to

⁶⁶ James O'Neill Spady, 'Colonialism and the Discursive Antecedents of Penn's Treaty with the Indians' in William A. Pencak and Daniel K. Richter (eds), *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park Penn., 2004, pp. 18-40.

tableau, from conflict to conciliation. It is there, arguably, in the pluralist rendering of the Genesis narrative, in which Australia becomes the Peaceable Kingdom where its people find happy refuge from the strife and torment of the Old World. Real life, of course, seldom assumes such ideal patterns; the 'Peaceable Kingdom' is a moment of *communias* forever remembered and forever anticipated, but seldom maintained for long.

The Evangelical humanitarians who dominated the formulation of British colonial policy in the 1830s and 40s had sought to 'conciliate' indigenous peoples. On the colonial frontier their policy was often translated into real or sham treaties between settlers and indigenes. By the late 1830s the humanitarians were becoming wary of such legal devices. 'As a general rule . . . it is inexpedient that treaties should be frequently entered into between local governments and the tribes in their vicinity', a House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines advised in 1837, citing the power-disparity between the partners, the potential for linguistic misunderstanding and the 'superior sagacity' which Europeans could exercise in framing and evading them.⁶⁷ Yet among settlers and colonial administrators the treaty idea continued to have strong appeal as a means of somehow accommodating the powerful contradictory pressures towards territorial acquisition, on the one hand, and humanitarianism on the other.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Paul Moon, *Te Ara Ki Te Tiriri: The Path to the Treaty of Waitangi*, David Ling Publishing, Auckland, 2002, p. 87.

The most famous of these treaties, the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, is by common consent the charter of modern New Zealand, the foundation stone for its own distinctive narrative of national becoming. As historians have shown, it was a compact combining exactly the kinds of power imbalance, calculated misunderstanding and bad faith that the humanitarians and colonial officials in London had feared. The Christian missionaries who first resisted the territorial ambitions of the New Zealand Company eventually became complicit in the negotiation of a treaty whose English version conferred a degree of sovereignty on the English settlers not revealed in the Maori version.⁶⁸ There is little sign that those signing it envisaged it as a long-lasting, foundational agreement. Yet within a very few years, it had already acquired strong symbolic significance. In 1846 Governor Robert Fitzroy observed:

Some persons still affect to deride it; some say it was a deception; . . . but whatever minor objections be raised, the fact is now unquestionable that the loyalty, the fidelity, and co-operation of any natives in New Zealand has hitherto depended on their reliance on the honour of Great Britain in adhering scrupulously to the Treaty of Waitangi – the Magna Carta of New Zealand.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Claudia Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi*, Allen & Unwin, Port Nicholson Press with assistance from the Historical Publications Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, NZ, 1987; and for an excellent historiographical review see Michael Belgrave, *Historical Frictions: Maori Claims and Reinvented Histories*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2005, pp. 40-85.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Belgrave, *Historical Frictions*, p. 43.

For much of the colonial period the symbolic significance of the Treaty receded in favour of more traditional narratives of exploration and discovery. The treaty document itself was locked away and only reappeared, moth-eaten and flyblown, in 1908. Only later still, in the 1980s, with the foundation of the Waitangi Tribunal, did historians and legal scholars rediscover the basis for a far-reaching reassertion of indigenous rights, more in the spirit than the letter of the original compact. As one influential historian noted, the main objective was not to recover the original significance of the treaty, 'a trace for a time', but to establish 'a foundation for a developing social contract'.⁷⁰

The scriptural foundation of the Waitangi Treaty gives a distinctive narrative impetus to national discourse in New Zealand, in striking contrast to Australia where no such covenant was made. In Australia the vision of a peaceable kingdom based on mutual respect between Aborigines and Europeans achieved occasional expression, for example in Benjamin Duterrau's remarkable 1840 painting of the Aboriginal Protector, George Robinson, 'The Conciliation', an image inspired directly by the Quaker missionary George Backhouse. A similar compact was recapitulated in the unofficial treaty concluded by John Batman, the self-styled 'William Penn of Port Phillip', with the Kulin, the traditional inhabitants of the land around modern Melbourne, and represented in a later historical painting by

⁷⁰ Keith Sorrenson, 'Towards a Radical Reinterpretation of New Zealand History: The Role of the Waitangi Tribunal' in I.H. Kawharu (ed.), *Waitangi: Maori and Pakeha Perspectives on the Treaty of Waitangi*, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1989, pp. 158-178.

John Wesley Burt.⁷¹ Yet crucially no such treaty was officially ratified. The idea of a treaty has remained, as the historian Henry Reynolds has argued, very much an unfulfilled promise in Australian history.⁷²

Although their roots lie deep within the Judaic tradition, ideas of reconciliation and peace, based on confession and mutual forgiveness, have had a special appeal to Christians. In the 1830s and 1840s, it was the Evangelicals or so called Humanitarians with their strong connections with the British Colonial Office, and the missionary, anti-slavery and aboriginal protection societies, who were in the vanguard.

Since the 1940s, Christians like Trevor Huddleston, Helen Joseph and, especially, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his leadership of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, have been among the most eloquent spokespersons for this vision of national peace-making and reconciliation. In Australia, too, Christians – or at least people strongly influenced by the Christian tradition, such as Mick and Pat Dodson, Frank Brennan and former Governor-General William Deane – have led the movement for a new compact or treaty between Aborigines and White Australians.

Now, in a memorable gesture of national reconciliation, they have been joined by a Christian political leader, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, whose speech moving for a national apology to

⁷¹ Bain Attwood, *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History*, Miegunyah, Melbourne, 2009.

⁷² See especially his *The Fate of a Free People*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1995.

the 'stolen generations' of Aborigines in February 2008 echoes the language of the Bible, in seeking to cleanse a 'stain on the national soul'. Many Australians, Christian and non-Christian alike, responded to the Apology with an alacrity that suggests Rudd was tapping a vein of latent sentiment sometimes unrecognised even by those who expressed it. The Apology is only one step along the road to reconciliation: Aborigines have yet to accept it, the question of reparations – an essential component in Tutu's model of 'truth and reconciliation' – remains unsettled. But there is at least a chance that the 'Peaceable Kingdom', the narrative so powerfully invoked by the new Prime Minister, could re-emerge, not just as a motif in Black-White relationships, but, as Rudd proposed, 'one of those rare moments in which we might just be able to transform the way in which the nation thinks about itself'.⁷³

The ideal of the 'Peaceable Kingdom', based on ideas of reconciliation and mutual forgiveness for the wrongs of the past, fills a symbolic space in the repertoire of national story-telling. It recognises, as other national myths do not, that the process of liberation and the construction of a national state cannot be undertaken until the legacy of dispossession and exploitation that followed from European conquest, and the wounds of the violence that accompanied the independence struggle, have been dealt with. While the Genesis narrative encourages a sense of reverence towards the past, and the Exodus narrative

expresses the desire to escape it, the Peaceable Kingdom expresses a desire to redeem, or overcome, the sins of the past.

A formal analysis of the narrative structure and function of these four national narratives brings out some of their contrasting characteristics and potentials. Some are constructed as journeys, with points of departure and arrival: their function is to underline a sense of progress, or confident movement from the past to an assured future. The Genesis narrative follows a journey through the wilderness *towards* the Promised Land while the Exodus narrative follows a journey *away from* captivity. Other biblical narratives are constructed according to the logic of convergence, from entropy to order: their purpose is constitutive or restorative. They are characteristically expressed in words as well as deeds. The Deuteronomy narrative relates the making of a national covenant; the 'Peaceable Kingdom' narrative tells how the covenant may be restored or made anew.

	Foundation	Redress/Restoration
Linear	Genesis	Exodus
Convergent	Deuteronomy	Peaceable Kingdom

The Fifth Narrative: The Odyssey

For the first century or so of our history, the four foundation narratives of settler society framed Australians' understanding of their past. None of these narratives, however, nor even the four working in combination, provided an entirely satisfactory basis

⁷³ Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0073.cfm.

for a sense of national selfhood. Some, like the Genesis narrative, with its emphasis on rites of foundation and conquest, were well adapted to the purposes of the first generations of European settlers, but lost their potency as the colonial experience faded and the implications of the European arrival for the nation's original inhabitants sank in. The Exodus Narrative, once the most favoured paradigm of national becoming in new lands, failed in Australia to generate a truly inspiring passage from captivity to freedom, just as the Deuteronomy Narrative has yet to produce a constitutional charter that crystallised the nation's character in words and sentiments of lasting inspiration. Only perhaps the Peaceable Kingdom Narrative, with its promise of reconciliation and atonement, offers the basis of a new national compact, although it remains as yet more a promise than a reality.

One of the main points they have in common, of course, is in seeking the sources of national selfhood in the encounter between an immigrant people and a new land. Their narrative flow has usually been convergent, from outside in, or from divergent starting points towards a national centre, expressed as a treaty or fabric of law. They are, at least residually, theocentric: they conceive the nation as a chosen or covenant community whose history unfolds according to divine command or manifest destiny.

These narratives, however, have recently competed with a fifth narrative that, in Australia at least, has gradually come to dominate all the others.⁷⁴ According to this narrative the nation is made, not by voyagers from the homeland to the new land, but by voyagers who travel in the reverse direction, outwards to prove themselves in the wider world. We might call this the Odyssey narrative.

Tell me, O Muse, [begins the opening sentence of Homer's epic] of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after he had sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted; moreover he suffered much by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home . . .

If the biblical master narratives move in accordance with a divine plan from departure to destination, or from conflict to reconciliation, the Odyssey narrative obeys no such providential logic. The Greek gods, unlike the God of the Old Testament, are capricious, their interventions in human affairs accord with no discernible moral design. The voyagers may return victorious, to claim fame and glory, or they may perish on the way.

In imagination or reality, colonial Australians had often rehearsed a Homeric narrative of national becoming. In imperial expeditions to the Sudan and South Africa, they had

⁷⁴ Compare Graeme Davison, 'The Habit of Commemoration and the Revival of Anzac Day', *Australian Cultural History*, no. 22, 2003 (Special Issue on 'Australians and the Past'), pp. 73-82.

sought military glory and recognition in a larger world.⁷⁵ Anzac, the tragic military adventure in which Australia is often said to have become nation, occupied a space already prepared in the national mind. In the years preceding the Great War Australia's state schoolteachers had inculcated the nation's children with a code of patriotic duty illustrated from the Greek and Roman classics. They learned to recite Tennyson's 'Ulysses' ('I cannot rest from travel; I will drink life to the lees . . .') from their primary school readers, and read of the last heroic stand of the Spartans at Thermopylae in Charles Kingsley's popular children's book, *The Heroes*.⁷⁶ Charles Bean, war historian and the most influential exponent of the Anzac tradition, was also a classical scholar, deeply conscious of the affinities between the story of the Australian and New Zealand Imperial Force at Gallipoli and the story enacted thousands of year before by the Greeks and the Trojans on that same shore.⁷⁷ Already, in the *Anzac Book* he edited while the Australians were still on the Peninsula, the Anzacs themselves were invoking the Homeric comparison:

⁷⁵ K. S. Inglis, *The Rehearsal: Australians at War in the Sudan*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1985.

⁷⁶ For example, 'The Story of Ulysses', *The School Paper*, Grades III and IV, July 1914, pp. 99-101; also see *The Victorian Readers, Sixth Book*, Second Edition, Government Printer, 1940, pp. 52-58; *Eighth Book*, Second Edition, pp. 187-188.

⁷⁷ K. S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 335-6 and for a fuller development of Bean's Homeric conception of history, see Robin Gerster, *Big-Nothing: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1987, p. 114.

Homeric wars are fought again
By men who like old Greeks can die;
Australian backblock heroes slain,
With Hector and Achilles lie.⁷⁸

Most of Australia's military adventures, from the Sudan and South Africa to Vietnam and Iraq, have been on fields far from Australia. Our soldiers often saw themselves as 'six-bob a day tourists', and our military traditions are intertwined with broader ideas of foreign adventure.⁷⁹

The Anzac Legend that Australians now celebrate is different from the one that Bean and his contemporaries created from the Greek epics and histories. In Pericles' Funeral Oration, lauding the virtues of Athenian democracy, Bean found a classical counterpart for his ideal of the Australian citizen soldier and a motto for the Australian War Memorial.⁸⁰ The Greeks also offered models of heroic self-sacrifice, like the famous legend of mothers farewelling their soldier sons to the battlefield with the injunction to return either victorious or on their shields. (In 1927 a terra cotta tableau of this subject was installed in the new Australian Parliament House). These were the myths of service

⁷⁸ J. Wareham, 'The Trojan War, 1915' in *The Anzac Book*, Cassell and Co. London, 1916, p. 104.

⁷⁹ Richard White, 'The Soldier as Tourist: The Australian Experience of the Great War', *War and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, May 1987, pp. 63-77.

⁸⁰ Inglis, *Sacred Places*, p. 336; also note Ambrose Pratt's comparison of Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance to monuments of the 'Periclean Age', Bruce Scates, *A Place to Remember: A History of the Shrine of Remembrance*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2009, p. 11.

and sacrifice that sustained the men who fought the Great War and the families who yielded up their sons.⁸¹

The Anzac Legend has now been reborn as a myth for all Australians, especially for the young among whom the backpacker pilgrimage to Gallipoli (with a side-trip to Troy) has become almost a generational rite of passage. In these retellings, the old themes of patriotic duty and sacrifice have receded in favour of an emphasis on travel and risky adventure.⁸²

The popularity of the Anzac legend links to other Australian odysseys, such as the journeys of Australian sportspeople, movie stars and other celebrities, as well as expeditionary soldiers. It has a strong appeal to a nation that has always been inclined to see itself through the eyes of others, especially its great and powerful friends, Britain and the United States.⁸³ Increasingly, it seems, the nation is constituted, not by the achievements of its immigrants, but by the feats of its temporary, or long-term emigrants, the growing numbers of young Australians who seek their fortunes in a global economy. Some of these voyagers may return to Australia, but like Ulysses and his companions, their return is uncertain and not foreordained. It was one of these

⁸¹ Peter Londey, 'A Possession for Ever: Charles Bean, the Ancient Greeks, and Military Commemoration in Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2007, pp. 344-359.

⁸² A judgment based on the testimony of backpackers quoted in Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2006, pp. 188-203; a judgment, however, that Scates may not endorse.

⁸³ Graeme Davison, 'The Imaginary Grandstand', *Meanjin*, no. 3, 2002, pp. 4-18.

voyagers, the singer Peter Allen, grandson of a Tenterfield saddler, husband of Hollywood film star, gay icon of the New York stage, victim of AIDS, who composed their anthem.

I've been to cities that never close down
From New York to Rio and old London town
But no matter how far or how wide I roam
I still call Australia home

The Odyssey narrative occupies the space created by the failure of earlier settler narratives to meet the circumstances of a post-colonial Australia. These narratives can be adapted and recuperated to a degree, but none supplies an account of the nation and its origins that is simultaneously inspiring, plausible and unifying. The one that offers most promise in the eyes of many intellectuals, the reconciliation narrative, is as yet incomplete. Meanwhile, the national story that commands almost universal support is one that draws us, not inwards – to a more thorough reckoning with the problems posed by our distinctive geography and history – but outwards, and then not into an open-minded and open-hearted encounter with the world, but to a chauvinistic attempt to prove ourselves in the eyes of others.

Does this matter? Perhaps binding narratives are less important than other sources of social cohesion. Happy is the nation *without* a history, it is sometimes said. If that is so, then Australia has more reason than most nations to be happy. But it is an innocent kind of happiness, that of a child rather than a

mature nation. At a time when the old pillars of national identity are crumbling and the forces of globalisation grow stronger, a nation without an inspiring, binding narrative may feel that it is still incomplete. Australia, I have suggested, is a mostly happy and cohesive nation that is still in search of its story.