***Strong Country***

***Teaching the Longer Timelines as the Key to Unity & Wellbeing***

The Badtjala people on K’gari (or Fraser Island) have a song some 250 years old that describes in exquisite prose a spirit canoe trailing smoke and moving *like a sand-crab*. This was the Endeavour as Lt James Cook and his men tacked back and forth along the coastline in 1770. The song ends with a question, “*Why have they come here*?

You may find this treasure of Australian history in a book and video entitled *East Coast Encounter* at the Australian National Maritime Museum[[1]](#footnote-1). It is a collaboration of artists, poets and historians, which I was part of from 2010 to 2013. We tell the encounter story ‘from the ship and the shore’ to bring into our national narrative an appreciation of the First People’s sense of the longer timelines of history.

I made that film and wrote the opening essay of the book to explain the profound disorientation that has lasted until this day after the Endeavour sailed into Kamay or Botany Bay. The Englishmen with their Marine mentality fired their muskets on every landing. These truths of our history, the story of Invasion, disease, dispossession, massacre, enslaved labour and stolen children are all facets of the great waves of cruelty, ignorance and racism implicit in the Australian version of colonialism. How quickly disease, malnutrition and all of the white man’s ‘poisons’ contributed to the massive obliteration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing.

To make sense of where we are today and to close this space between us, we need to understand some truths at a young age. We need to study history from the beginning, embracing the story of the land itself breaking away from the supercontinent Gondwana and traveling north each year for about a finger nail’s distance. The story of animal and human migrations in the past, enhanced by fascinating discoveries in our own neighbourhood, give us a foundation to understand Australia’s multiculturalism and multilingualism, and also, if we look at the Big Picture, why we now have 65 million people crossing borders around the world, the greatest movement of people in history.

We should keep students abreast of the new scientific confirmations that the First Peoples have probably been here for somewhere between 80,000 and 120,000 years, longer than anyone truly knows. The timeline for the human story in this land keeps getting extended. In his marvellous, expansive text, *DARK EMU,* Bruce Pascoe writes of the First Woman in the world making bread here fifteen thousand years before grain was ground into flour to make bread in ancient Egypt.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Lake Mungo archaeology dated that single intriguing settlement at over forty thousand years. Art and human artefacts found elsewhere up north pushed the timeline out further to over 60,000 years. Now, on the Victorian coastline, archaeologists, including some who worked at Lake Mungo, have dated a cooking hearth at roughly 120,000 years.

The longer timeline allows us to explore with students such marvels of human inventiveness that we develop a deeper appreciation of what the world’s oldest oral historians have been telling us for so long about the strengths, beauty and resilience of these diverse ancient cultures that span thousands of generations.

The dominant historical texts that most educators studied in the past, from Manning Clark on the Left to Geoffrey Blainey on the Right, never did justice to the longer timelines but only fuelled the ideological fires of the so-called ‘Culture Wars’. These historians came to some understanding of Indigenous people only very late in their writing. Recent scholarship available to all students is far more hopeful and helpful because it changes our understanding dramatically.

Bill Gammage’s *THE BIGGEST ESTATE ON EARTH[[3]](#footnote-3)*, and Bruce Pascoe’s *DARK EMU,* show that truthful history overcomes the binary division. A white historian and a black historian arrive at the same facts. You see we can all have *opinions* about the past, the present or the future but it is more important to try to find out and teach *the facts*. The truth has a power and a beauty all of its own. It will inspire your students to understand how we all belong to a diverse human family, full of creativity and different approaches to problem solving. This is the deliciousness of difference.

As your students read *THE BIGGEST ESTATE ON EARTH* and *DARK EMU* they will discover how the facts described in the journals of the explorers, Mitchel, Hunter and Sturt, match the veracity of Indigenous oral history. You will find vivid descriptions of the vast crops of Daisy Yams that existed through the Indigenous style of cultivation which Gammage calls ‘farming without fences’. The Daisy Yams have all but disappeared because of over clearing of the land. Yet if you are ready to travel with your students on an adventure of the mind or literally on a bus, you can the ingenious stone engineering of the eel farming at Lake Condo in Victoria and the massive fish traps at Brewarrina in New South Wales. You will learn from Aboriginal storytellers how mob travelled from far and wide to these places to trade and feast when the Bogong months or the Bunya nuts were in season. Now you think that this is a large conference. Imagine four thousand people from different Aboriginal nations all being catered for on the river bank at Brewarrina.

This discussion with your students opens up an appreciation of the principle of Custodianship. This brilliant Indigenous intellectual concept is akin to the very best Earth Science, as it takes a long-term view of the inter-connectedness of all life and assigns some responsibility to every man, woman and child. As we stare at the news clips of mass fish extinctions along the Murray-Darling River and ponder the dire warnings over the summer ahead unless the drought breaks, our students will appreciate how the Indigenous eel and fish farms allowed the rivers to flow and kept the smaller species moving to their breeding grounds. As our wetlands in NSW continue to dry out, we will appreciate that Custodianship allowed the migratory birds to nest here after their own wondrous journeys from as far away as Russia.

In every area of human knowledge there is a foundation of Indigenous knowledge, from A for Astronomy to Z for Zoology. Young Australians will be fascinated to know that we have wild rice, native grains and scores of other plants that allowed the First Peoples to carry out s sustainable harvest without pesticides or fertilisers. The white explorers saw tall haycocks in the Aboriginal fields of grain, deep water wells lined with clay and in some parts, stone huts with slate roofs. Instead of seeing the romanticised noble savage or a primitive hunter gatherer, that outdated, inaccurate and patronising stereotype of so much earlier education, children will come to see the wonder of our human family’s ancestral stories. This is the story of humanity’s development across the millennia from the Children of the Sunrise. It is their descendants who invite us to understand what it is to be held by this land, what it means to be *Australian.* Once we know this story we can walk the country together and more fully appreciate the First Peoples.

Next year, the 250th anniversary of Cook’s voyage on the Endeavour, it is a perfect time, as I write in my essay, *East Coast Encounters,* to explore the view “from the ship and the shore”.

I think the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison and the Australian National Maritime Museum, have borrowed my words as they develop plans to send an Endeavour replica on a circumnavigation of the continent next year. I hope they do listen to all sides of this story.

So much was lost in translation at the time of Cook’s voyage in 1770. Although he talks initially in his journal about “Indians” and wretched people, after his experiences running the ship aground on the Great Barrier Reef, he develops a new appreciation of those on the shore. He notes their navigational skills. Tellingly, he writes of a people living at one with the land and displaying “no inequality of condition.”

The French explorer, Baudin, who sailed around much of Australia from 1802 to 1804 similarly described fit looking Aboriginal people. The French artists sketched strong bodies and very healthy children. The very next generation of Aboriginal children sketched by the early English colonists and Irish convicts have the distended stomachs and other signs of the disruption of their traditional nutritional pattern of plenty of plant food, fish and moderate amounts of meat.

This is a global pattern that I have witnessed among most of the world’s First Nations peoples. From my journeys into the Amazon from the 1970s, through the Maya Quiche genocide in Guatemala in 1982 and across the First Nations of North America, for decades I have seen the obliteration of the First Peoples’ control over their destiny. After the massacres and dispossession, disease, sugar, tobacco, processed flour and ultimately alcohol devastated the cultural organisation that had existed for longer than Europe itself.

This First Nations pattern has been studied extensively by California’s Weston Price Institute and many others in Australia including the Menzies School of Health. It illustrates the impact of the white man’s poisons and I have found it is a very useful way to introduce all children to a vital understanding of the nature of human happiness and wellbeing. Sugar, tobacco, processed flour and alcohol have done so much damage to the human family that even in the 21st century we await enlightenment and perhaps a surge in new ideas to break harmful habits and addictions. We do need to connect *learning* to *life*.

Once Aboriginal people were confined to segregated camps, missions and ultimately gaols this oppressive control accelerated the extraordinary collapse of life. The use of these white man’s poisons as a form of meagre payment or rationing for slave-like labour helped create a creeping plague of disastrous health problems and the procession of early funerals that to this day our nation appears to accept as inevitable. The ‘smoothing of the dying pillow’ is not an historical expression, in my view, but an indelible characteristic of our nation’s treatment of Indigenous people.

In one form or another, through racism, discrimination and neglect, Indigenous people have been denied the freedom and other fundamental human rights essential for wellbeing. Assimilation, the cursed constant of all major policies towards Indigenous Australians, is like a steel shackle on the minds of First Peoples. Whether you are restricted to the mission, the shanty, the poorest housing or end up in juvenile detention or an adult prison, too many Indigenous people are unnecessarily confined.

One of the cruellest and most damaging of the white man’s poisons is alcohol. It has claimed more Australian lives than the Frontier Wars. Isn’t that a sobering thought? Each year over 5,500 deaths and 157,000 hospitalisations are caused by grog.[[4]](#footnote-4) Australians, all of us, black and white, are downing some 12.6 litres of pure alcohol per year per capita and so it should be no real surprise that alcohol related deaths including those linked to cancer have increased by more than 60% according to a Vic Health study comparing the last two decades.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What is perhaps even more confronting, of the 3 million Australian children born over the past decade, at least 105,000 have brain damage from alcohol exposure before their birth. While only 28% of us exceed the daily recommended limit of two standard drinks, as a nation we have clearly made alcohol so socially acceptable, so accessible and so heavily promoted as part of our good times and celebrations, that we spend less time facing up to the curse that we are handing our children, our grand-children and yes, even our great-grandchildren.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder or FASD is a hidden epidemic as damaging as the drug thalidomide was once to so many children. The evidence I want to share with you today should be added to our curriculum urgently in a public health campaign for all young girls and women. My research and work with some of Australia’s leading health specialists indicates that FASD is a major factor in some of the biggest challenges we are all facing including children who appear too impulsive to learn, children being removed from family, children committing suicide and children growing into adults who cannot escape that cycle from the poverty trap to the futility of prison.

According to the Australian paediatrician and neuro-developmental specialist on FASD, Dr Heidi Webster, even two binge drinking sessions during the first trimester of pregnancy is enough to cause Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. [[6]](#footnote-6) Dr Webster also advises that as almost 60% of all Australian pregnancies are unplanned, most women may not realise that they are pregnant around day 18 when it appears that the alcohol is going to be most damaging to the very vulnerable foetus.

The latest investigations that I want to share with you indicate that we are staring at a syndrome and a spectrum of disability that does indeed affect not only mother and child, but quite possibly the grandchildren and even great grandchildren. Professor Kelly Huffman’s research at the University of California suggests that while the ethanol does not change the unborn baby’s genetic sequence, it does appear to disrupt how that sequence is read, the impact known as epigenetics.[[7]](#footnote-7) Huffman’s studies on mice indicate that the brain size and body weight is affected in the first generation but the damage is also passed on to a second and third generation, albeit in slightly weaker forms of sensory and motor difficulties, anxiety and depression.

In Rockhampton, Queensland, a principal of an Aboriginal school told me that up to 80 per cent of the children at his school had been assessed as having Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. A wide body of evidence suggests that the faltering mental health of many of these children, their impulsiveness, poor memory and inability to concentrate, is linked to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Their ability to control their emotions, plan a simple task, absorb information and socialise with other people is significantly impeded. As they struggle to hear a parent or a teacher and to understand how to adapt to different situations they are steadily lost in a maze from which it is difficult to find their way out.

We have all witnessed such children by the age of ten or twelve disrupting the lives of their families, their classmates or even their communities. Some progress to so called minor crimes that through the ill-considered legislation of mandatory sentencing introduces them to confinement in juvenile detention centres and ultimately adult prisons.

The Telethon Kids Institute released findings of the first assessment of its kind in Australia, indicating that in the Banksia Hill Detention Centre in Western Australia at least one in three of the detainees or 30 to 40% of the young people are affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.[[8]](#footnote-8) This will not come as a shock to Aboriginal people but I believe the report on Banksia Hill should challenge governments and the judicial system to reassess the whole process of handling such children who clearly have a disability. The Royal Commission on the abuse of children in Dondale Detention Centre in the Northern Territory was given the same warnings by health experts that our nation is ignoring this intellectual impairment.

This is the important point here. In most parts of Australia, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder has not been classified as a disability although it has disabled an estimated 1.18 million Australians.[[9]](#footnote-9) As I have tried to make clear, trauma has many incarnations across the generations but where we see violent behaviour, self-harm and suicide, abuse and addiction, arson and domestic violence on a large scale, it is very likely, based on the Telethon Kids Institute findings, that Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is a highly significant factor.

An inquest into the suicides in the Kimberley of five Aboriginal children aged between 10 and 13 indicated that there was circumstantial evidence that a number of them had Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and many had used alcohol and cannabis. As Professor Ted Wilkes put it when asked to explain the pattern of youthful suicides, “Young kids are using alcohol to escape from something horrific that has happened to them.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

This brings us to one of the most sensitive and emotionally exhausting facets of your teaching profession as you see families disintegrate and the ongoing escalation of child removal in Australia. Community services, adoptive families and foster family organisations in several nations have reported that widespread behavioural problems among many of the children in these services indicate at least some of these children have been exposed to alcohol in their mother’s womb. The Peterborough study in the UK assessed that up to 75 per cent of the distressing behaviour reported by adoptive families may have a maternal link to alcohol.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In a hard-drinking nation like Australia this signals that the problems incurred in out of home care are likely to be made far worse by this largely hidden disability. Currently of more than forty thousand Australian children in out of home care, over fifteen thousand of them are Indigenous. Yet there are only a handful of FASD specialist centres in the whole country and most of these children are not being diagnosed. In fact, FASD is poorly assessed in most nations.

Women so often are not screened in pregnancy to establish possibly dangerous levels of alcohol consumption. Given the unplanned nature of their pregnancies many may not have considered that pregnant pause in drinking. Their GP may even be telling them that a couple of glasses of wine to relax is OK during pregnancy when in fact there is no safe level of alcohol exposure for the unborn child.

What a human catastrophe. Here we have a social practice, drinking wine, beer and spirits, that has spread around the world over a very long period of time. Warnings about wine affecting the unborn infant go back to Biblical times. Even before James Cook set sail for Australia with his rations of rum, a British Surgeon general in the early 1700s was saying that alcohol consumed by a pregnant woman could cause a withering of the foetus.

We are at our best when we offer positive life-changing information to young girls and boys. Look into their eyes as if they are your daughter or son and explain how every additional year they spend at school can add up to four years to the life expectancy of a young woman’s first baby. This is the research finding by Canada’s Dr Fraser Mustard and it shows how education is truly life changing.

Ken Wyatt, a Noongar man, Indigenous health administrator in NSW and WA and, now the first Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians, gave me added scientific incentive for my life-skilling approach for all students. Wyatt has research that indicates that for each of those extra years of education we can add to that young girl’s schooling we will reduce infant mortality by seven to ten percent. [[12]](#footnote-12)

These are some of the fundamental lessons that we still have not shared with all Australian children. If you require guidance or resources for students like this in your care go to the NOFASD website of the National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Another most important lesson is that the First Peoples did not surrender their human rights or their entitlement to the wellbeing afforded by their land and waters. There were no treaties after the Frontier Wars which claimed over twenty thousand Aboriginal lives and several thousand more European lives. As a result, there is a great deal of unfinished business and this is another of our challenges today. Constitutional change and reform is our nation’s neglected project. We must carefully teach how our Constitution came to be stained with racism and then we can understand the Referendum issues that may emerge during our student’s high school years.

Some of the consequences of dispossession can be addressed today by supporting local communities, local decision making and getting to understand the work of regional assembles in NSW such as Murdi Paaki. Ultimately a reconstitution of the nation-wide interaction of the First Peoples should be supported. This is why the First Nations are seeking Voice, Truth-seeking and Treaty making. It is very important that schools forge close and respectful relationships with local Elders and Aboriginal organisations

Aboriginal advice, experience and leadership is central at all levels to making changes that have stubbornly proved resistant to top-down government policies. Two former Australian Prime Ministers gave me insights on why their governments had failed to deliver on the high hopes at various times in our history. More than 90 per cent of Australians voted YES in the 1967 referendum to end the exclusion of the First Peoples and count them in as equals. When we voted ‘YES’ we did not imagine that a federal government would use that power to make laws that discriminated against the First Peoples, such as in the disastrous Northern Territory Intervention, the most damaging policy since the creation of the Stolen Generations. The momentum of the 1967 referendum was to a large degree squandered. We should avoid heroically exaggerating the achievements of such moments until we also recognise that Aboriginal expectations have been hugely betrayed by this pattern of *trust followed by treachery.* Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser told me that he believed this was due to cabinet level weakness and indecision across several governments. Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke shared with me his profound disappointment at not fulfilling the expectations of the Indigenous elders who presented him with the Barunga Statement in 1988 to implement an historic Treaty. Bob Hawke said that this too was due to the vested interests that undermined the commitment within his own party.

The key lesson here in a new season of political possibility is that we all must look for the truth, by studying the evidence on such matters. Over thirty years of research by the Harvard Project on Native American communities underscores the importance of Indigenous voices setting the agenda, injecting advice and analysis that massively effects the outcomes for the First Peoples. Instead of hesitation over an Indigenous ‘Voice’ in our nation’s affairs we have to see it as the missing social mechanism. ‘Voice’ is the evidence- based expression of what will work and to what degree people are willing to work together to negotiate the next important legal agreements. This will take courage in the way we approach reconciliation.

The courage of the First Peoples has been demonstrated many times and on many fronts. My father and grandfather fought overseas alongside Indigenous troops who made great sacrifices but had little recognition back home. This too is unappreciated truth of our history: how the First Peoples not only fought to defend their land against invasion and dispossession, but continued to do this with little acknowledgment in every major conflict that Australia engaged in over the past two centuries.

Even when their rights were not recognized in their own land, the First Peoples have produced statesmen and women who are among Australia’s greatest human rights advocates. Tell your students of William Cooper’s eloquent plea to the German Consul General, demanding after Kristallnacht that the Nazis stop slaughtering Jewish people. Teach them about Pearl Gibbs, Jack Patten, Fred Maynard and of course William Ferguson, whom we honoured earlier this year with a statue in Dubbo. These are inspirational figures in the world-wide struggle for human rights. Vincent Lingiari and Eddie Mabo are global heroes in the struggle for land rights. Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Rosalie Kunoth-Monks are monumental figures in the struggle by women. Their unity of purpose, patience and persistence has produced a quality of political leadership that achieved cultural survival.

This brings us to one last important fact worth teaching and it is perhaps the real *miracle* of our lifetime. Sorry Prime Minister Morrison it’s not your ‘election miracle’. The courage and extraordinary resilience of the First Peoples have not only defied the foolhardy Darwinian predictions of their extinction, but today the First Peoples collectively rival or surpass the number of their ancestors. Languages are being spoken and actively revived despite the relentless onslaught on culture and the poison of racism. Songs and dances thrive. Bangarra produces many of the most beautiful performances that you will see anywhere in the world. The film makers, too, are giving us the truth in cinema and on television with unprecedented strength and clarity. The writers, poets, musicians and songwriters are connecting us to many of the nation’s true stories which we have ignored for so long. These many Voices, in my view, offer the greatest hope, the most insightful perspectives and ultimately the most useful knowledge on how we must transform the relationship. We will advance together through learning and deep listening.

Key note speech to New South Wales Catholic Education Conference on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. Hunter Valley. September 10-12 2019.

1. Gemma Cronin. Translation of Badtjala Song. In *East Coast Encounter.* Foreword by Jeff McMullen. Project organised by University of Sunshine Coast. Exhibtion at Australian National Maritime Museum. Published by One Day Hill, Collingwood, Victoria 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu,* Published byMagabala Books. Broome. Western Australia. 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth,* Published by Allen and Unwin. Australia 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Vic Health. Alcohol’s Burden of Harm in Australia. 31 July 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dr Heidi Webster, Address to Foetal Alcohol Seminar, Rockhampton, Queensland, October 13th 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kelly Huffman, “Prenatal Ethanol Exposure and Neocortical Development: A Transgenerational Model of FASD.” Pub Oxford journal Cerebral Cortex. July 6 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Charlotte Hamlyn, ABC NEWS, “One in three in WA youth detention have foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, study finds. March 3rd 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Louise Gray, National organisation for Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Address to Rockhampton Seminar on FASD October 12 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Irena Ceranic, ABC NEWS, Kimberley Indigenous Suicide Inquest told Kids using alcohol to escape ‘something horrific’. June 27 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Geraldine Gregory, Venkat Reddy, Clare Young, “Identifying children who are at risk of FASD in Peterborough: working in a clinic without access to gold standard diagnosis. Adoption & Fostering Journal. UK. September 28 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ken Wyatt cited by Jeff McMullen in “When Literacy Can Mean Life.” Griffith Review. Autumn Edition 11. Getting Smart. 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. # [NOFASD Australia - National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol ...](https://www.nofasd.org.au/)

    [https://www.nofasd.org.au](https://www.nofasd.org.au/) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)