



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/JVON5553>

**Henry Reynolds, *Truth-Telling: History, sovereignty and the Uluru Statement***

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**To cite this book review:** Henry Reynolds, *Truth-Telling: History, sovereignty and the Uluru Statement* by Benjamin T. Jones, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 2 (September 2022): 98-99, <https://doi.org/10.52230/ILBU1450>

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Henry Reynolds, *Truth-Telling: History, sovereignty and the Uluru Statement* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021), 288pp. Paperback. A\$34.99. ISBN: 978-1-7422-3694-0.

Henry Reynolds is one of Australia's most significant historians and *Truth-Telling* is his most significant book in decades. When he published *The Other Side of the Frontier* in 1981, he was one of several pioneering scholars responding to W. E. H. Stanner's famous call to end the 'great Australian silence' on the brutal impact of colonisation on First Nations. At the time, Reynolds' book was revisionist, it is now canonical. Reynolds was a key player in Australia's History Wars of the late 1990s and early 2000s and the *bête noire* of those who rejected the so-called 'black armband' school of history.

Reynolds is well-known in Australian history circles but his new book attempts to break out of that, sometimes insular, community of scholars and achieve a far broader reach. *Truth-Telling* is as political as it is historical and draws on the past to make an argument for structural change in the future. In many ways this is the perfect book for someone who has never read or perhaps even heard of Reynolds before. Helpfully for the new audience he hopes to find, the book starts with a brief overview of his career and explains why the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart is so important to him personally. The Uluru Statement calls for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament enshrined in the constitution and a 'Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history'. Then Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, curtly rejected the recommendations via a press release. The thesis of the book is that it should be of the highest importance to all Australians. Further, Reynolds notes that Turnbull's 'brutal rebuff' (p. 237) is part of a long historical pattern of disrespect. By contrast he argues that 'truth-telling is the ultimate gesture of respect' (p. 239).

Two decades ago, Colin Tatz opined that 'If there was a race between democratic nations to see who could best address the violation of the human rights (of its own people) Australia would be coming stone motherless last'. Notwithstanding then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's national apology in 2008, Reynolds suggests that it is still the case. He points to examples around the world of treaties with First Nations, the removal of colonial statues, and the establishment of truth-telling commissions and prompts the reader to ask why these things do not take place in Australia. Truth-telling in particular, the leitmotif of the book, can cause great discomfort for those who have benefitted from Indigenous dispossession because it necessarily involves a degree of myth busting. The peaceful settlement myth has been utterly debunked in academia and significantly challenged in public memory but others remain.

Reynolds powerfully challenges the tenacious myth that, even though we can now acknowledge its harmful nature, Indigenous dispossession was fair and legal by the standards of the day. Drawing on the influential seventeenth century Dutch jurist, Hugo Grotius and various legal experts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Reynolds demonstrates that this was not the case. By the time James Cook arrived at Possession Island in 1770, it was well-established that a claim of discovery could not be made in a peopled area, even if they were not Christian or regarded by Europeans as primitive.

Further, no claim of possession was considered legitimate unless the power physically occupied it. After the colony of Sydney was established in 1788, the majority of First Nations continued to occupy their traditional lands unmolested. Even after Federation in 1901, vast sections of northern Australia remained in traditional

ownership. This raises the uncomfortable question of when, if ever, did First Nations lose their sovereignty? Reynolds concludes that Cook's ceremony on Possession Island 'did not...amount to all that much' (p. 17). By claiming huge parcels of land he had never stepped foot on and that, in some cases, no white person would see for another century or more, he might as well have claimed possession of the moon. The Uluru Statement emphatically claims, 'sovereignty never ceded'. For Reynolds, this is not a mere political slogan but a statement of legal fact.

In the second part of the book, Reynolds turns his attention from the past to the future. There are consequences to truth-telling and they often involve reassessing national symbols and rituals. He dedicates a chapter to Australia Day and asks why its apostles are so trenchantly committed to celebrating a day that represents profound misery and loss for First Nations. Giving particular attention to Samuel Griffith, he questions why Federation fathers who had the power but did little to curb violence against Indigenous people have suburbs, electorates, and universities named after them. Why is it that the Australian War Memorial commemorates every conflict involving Australians except the Frontier Wars, 'arguably our most important war' (p. 196).

Reynolds' impact on Australian history is undeniable but with *Truth-telling* he hopes to have a broader influence by calling for a re-examination of Australia's public spaces, eponymous heroes, and constitution. Perhaps its greatest virtue is placing Australia's culture and history wars in a global perspective. In Canada, South Africa, the United States, United Kingdom, and many other places, conversations about public history and commemoration are taking place. In 2020, a statue of slave trader, Edward Colston, was taken down by Black Lives Matter protesters in Bristol and thrown into the river. In Australia, Cook statues received protection from mounted police. Reynolds prompts the reader to reflect, 'why identify so completely with the imperial invaders?' (p. 141).

The recommendations of the Uluru Statement remain unrealised but polling suggests that there is much public good will. In *Truth-telling*, Reynolds has provided a strong historical case for reflection and action. Critics will see the book as overly negative and focused only on the sins of the past. Supporters will see in it a powerful case for change.

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