

Penny van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal cultures of writing in Australia*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies, 2006, 280pp.

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In Chapter 5 of her book *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, Penny van Toorn quotes a passage from the 1831 journal of George Augustus Robinson, who had many dealings with Aborigines in Tasmania and, later, in Victoria. It repeats a story that had been told to him by John Batman in a letter. A Captain Kneale had taken a six-year-old Aboriginal boy to England in 1821:

One night the boy was in conversation with him [Captain Kneale] and asked him who made the moon. He replied, God; God made everything. Then, looking steadily up at the Heavens for a few moments as if in deep reflection, he [the boy] said, do you see that star near the moon? He answered, yes. He replied, he supposed God made that star also? He replied, yes. Ah, said he, the moon's after that star and he will catch him too, and that he supposed the star was some poor black fellow and the moon would soon catch him. (99)

Captain Kneale reads the night sky as proof of the goodness of the God who made everything in the idyllic unfallen world of Genesis, while the young boy reads the night sky very differently, in the light of recent history, where moon and star exist in a “fallen” world, and where the coloniser threatens to destroy him and his people.

To the colonisers, print culture was a marker of civilisation. To them, the fact that the Indigenous people of Australia did not have books was proof of their primitive state. Some of the colonisers believed that the Indigenous people were inherently incapable of reading and writing; others believed that they could be “saved” from their primitive state by learning to read and write. To take part in this salvific process was therefore a double-edged weapon—in the colonisers’ eyes it made them civilised; it also made them slaves to the colonising process. In dealing with these issues, van Toorn is careful not to fall for the assimilationist trap. In a sense it is true that to the Indigenous people, the land is a “reliable, indestructible book” (215), or, as Bill Neidje puts it: “Our story is in the land [. . .] it is written in those sacred places” (9). Such language, however, treads a perilous line in metaphorically absorbing one culture into the cultural norms (“the book”) of another. All “reading” is

culturally specific, as the six-year-old boy demonstrates with his allegory of the moon and the sun.

Penny van Toorn is interested in the ways the Indigenous people negotiated their way through the colonisers' paper culture of books and written documents: "Aboriginal communities have been able to develop and adapt their own new and distinct cultures of literacy in a manner that perpetuates traditional, orally grounded social structures and values" (11). She does this by examining a variety of Indigenous responses to, and uses of, print culture.

Governor Macquarie was concerned to "civilise" the Indigenous children by teaching them to read and write, and he held an annual "native feast" at Parramatta to convince Aboriginal parents to leave their children at a residential Aboriginal school. The Bible was central to the reading program. Macquarie's program was not successful, but van Toorn suggests that this began an association between books (symbolising the colonisers' culture) and the stealing of children that continued into the stolen generations. In Chapter 2 van Toorn suggests this business of stealing children and teaching them to read books was interpreted according to the widespread creation myth of the relationship between Eaglehawk and Crow, "the mighty hunter, Eaglehawk, and the shrewd, opportunistic Crow" (32). There is some evidence that Governor Macquarie's name became associated with Indigenous words for Eaglehawk, such as Mak-quarra, Mokwarra, Mukwarra, so one way of explaining this colonising force that wanted to steal children and make them read books was to interpret such events in terms of the myth, and so Eaglehawk became the moon of the six-year-old Indigenous boy's allegory, and Crow became the star.

Chapter 3 deals with Bennelong's dictated letter, addressed to Lord Stanley (and his wife), with whom Bennelong had stayed during his trip to England between 1792 and 1795. It is an amalgamation of different epistolary modes that Bennelong could have gleaned from his knowledge of Governor Phillip's letters: letters that provided news ("I have not my wife: another man took her away"); letters that conveyed personal greetings ("I hope you are very well [. . .] hope very well family"); and letters that requested supplies ("Madam I want stockings. thank you Madam; send me two pair Stockings [. . .] Sir, send me please some Handkerchiefs for Pocket. you please Sir send me some shoes: two pair you please Sir"). Bennelong would have perceived that letters were objects that were sent to England, and which brought back results—a request was sent out for supplies, and supplies (generally) came back. The mix of epistolary modes, as Bennelong pieces together bits of the colonisers' writing

culture, partly explains what seem like very odd tonal shifts. But van Toorn argues that these must be explained as the result, in part, of Bennelong's attempt to balance the formalities of a patronage system with a kin-based cultural system of gift-giving.

Chapter 4 shows how the distinctions between phonographic, ideographic, and pictographic scripts can be broken down. Two carved Wiradjuri wooden clubs, in addition to traditional decoration, use letters and numerals as pure ornament. Similarly, a young Aboriginal prisoner in a Darwin jail at the end of the nineteenth century copies ornamental letters merely to create graphic patterns without any concern for their phonographic or sound values. In both cases the colonisers' alphabet has been assimilated to Indigenous culture not according to its phonographic values, but according to the ways it fitted in with traditional patterns of inscription. The colonisers, however, can also exploit the breaking down of such distinctions. In a devastating analysis of the various copies of the treaty that John Batman made with the Woiworong of the Melbourne area, van Toorn shows that Batman probably copied the dendroglyph (an ideograph) that one of the Woiworong elders had been tricked into marking on a tree, and used it as a signature (and also as a series of signatures) on legal documents, exploiting a signature's borderline status between ideograph and phonograph, and constructing a forgery.

Chapters 5 to 7 examine the responses to print culture on Aboriginal reserves and missions. On Flinders Island in the 1830s, where people from a number of tribes were lumped together on country that was not traditional to any of them, two literate young men were able to achieve power and status in writing and delivering religious texts, because the traditional kin structures had been broken down by the mixing. In this case, the introduction of literacy to the young meant that the traditional power structures were overturned. At Coranderrk in Victoria in the 1880s, however, the new literacy was assimilated to traditional structures. The people on this reserve were involved in a series of complaints, by means of petitions, to the external authorities about their treatment on the reserve. The Aboriginal people were primarily from the same group. William Barak was clearly the senior man. The petitions were written by the literate young, but the ordering of the signatures on the petitions shows that the traditional power structures were preserved: Barak and the senior men sign first with crosses, then the literate younger men sign their names, then the older senior women who generally signed with crosses, and so on. Barak and his people understood the power of writing, and knew that if their petitions got to the external authorities they would be formally tabled and minuted. To this end, it was sometimes advisable to

channel the petition through an influential white, and sometimes advisable to combine paper culture with traditional oral culture. On a number of occasions they walked the 67 miles to Melbourne to deliver the petition, in writing, and to deliver it orally: both written and oral traditions reinforced one another. At Lake Condah Mission Station in south-western Victoria in the late nineteenth century, petitions of complaint against the superintendent were disguised under pretence of deference or supplication. As long as the authorities such as the superintendent controlled the flow of information, the protests of the Indigenous people could be suppressed. But as the younger people became literate, they were ironically handed the means of controlling for themselves the flow of information out of the station.

This is an important book. It has been assumed that the voices of Australian Indigenous people in the nineteenth century have been largely lost, and that the printed record includes mainly secondhand renditions of their speech. Some of the source material used in this book was known, but it has not been subjected to the kind of complex analysis that is provided here. Penny van Toorn has retrieved much new material from the archives, and her research offers clues about how others might follow her example. Most importantly, she has set a very high benchmark for the kind of rigorous and sympathetic analysis that this material deserves.

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