Nene Gare and Patricia Crawford: Sally Morgan's My Place - Two Views

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Sister Tremearne was covering the north of Western Australia for Trachoma suspects and she took me with her on one of her tours. When we drove into the Blood's place on the Murchison Joyce left me to make enquiries at the homestead and I got out of the utility to talk to two slow moving soft spoken pure blood old ones, perhaps eighty years apiece, the woman more assured because she still had her hearing. I told them my name. Gare. Across the woman's face flowed a warmth. She leaned over to her brother/husband. 'You know. That man boss of all us feller.'

I wanted to disclaim, repudiate, thrust away the shamefulfulness of such an indiction - until instinct alerted me the shame was only mine. Not for this old woman the ridiculous layers of our one-upmanship. She and her kind lived as they always had, by the sun. In peace. And if peace were to continue the newcomers must be humoured. You used the names they assumed for themselves but the names were something else altogether from what went on in the people's heads. Dreamtime, that was the most of it. Sit in the sun and dream and wait.

It is this tranquillity, this utter quiet which is at the heart of the aboriginal Australian which is the quality which comes through so strongly in Sally Morgan's book My Place. I am so glad, so thankful to have it there at last for the strangers in their land to read and understand. This is the quality we have reviled and despised and done our best to destroy and never once thought worth emulating. The one most precious thing they had to give to us, more important even than their knowledge and care of their land.

I believe their serenity reaches deep in this land. They know it - feel it. The dignity of the American Indian is similarly rooted. Here is the reason neither race has bent the knee to their conquerors. Pity the African negroes. Separated from their spirit land, witnesses to the most fearful and humiliating practices, nothing left to them but the breath in their bodies. Dead and alive still.

Land is blood and bone and spirit and thousands of years of living. By what thousandth century do present Australians believe this land will be truly theirs?

Professor Elkin came thousands of miles to interview my two old people some of the last of their tribe who spoke the language. Sally Morgan years later followed suit - searching the north for members of her family; finding them at last. They welcomed her with love. She discovered she meant as much to them as they to her. The most tender passage in the whole book is the account of Sally's meeting with relatives so distant there are no more than a few drops of kindred blood to unite them. But the love is still there. Unbelievable. Touching and tender. The kindness. Unbelievable. Have they cornered the market in kindness, these people? I envy them their abundance. I wish for some of it to come our way. Would love beget love? Or is it too late?

I am not a professional reviewer, as Max Harris and the A.B.C. found to their dismay when I forgot the names of characters. I write as books affect me emotionally and these are the emotions fired to blazing by Sally Morgan's My Place. She has left the tales of Arthur. of Nan and of Gladys exactly as they were told to her. So the truth of them digs deep. I wish that we and some of those others whose Aboriginal blood has been diluted, could share their lovely untouchable dignity.
Sally's story begins with a quest for identity. Are brothers and sisters, mother, grandmother and great-uncle, all? Other families own networks of relations. Why not she?

In her teens she discovers her forebears are not Indian, as she has been told, but Australian Aboriginal. That's okay with Sally but why the lies? Gregarious Sally is outraged to find her mother and grandmother united in a scheme to protect her and her brothers and sisters from persecution - for possessing some of the pure blood of the original owners of her country. But the thought of possible persecution cannot deflect her from her obstinate search for close relatives and in her search she finds a supporter in great-uncle Arthur. Patience and tenacity are needed to get Arthur's story then it is used as a wedge to force more confidences from grandmother Nan and mother Gladys.

What a story! Whatever the hardships of Albert Facey, his skin was white and he was given a fair go for the most part. More or less, his characteristics were the same as those of other white folk. He was understood. The Australian Aboriginal has never received understanding. He has been told, fit in or get out. With thousands of years of a different culture behind him he has been ridiculed, despised, given names usually bestowed on animals, and used like an animal. The nearest he came to adopting the style of life forced upon him by white land takers was to open up the limitless north for sheep and cattle farming and that was because the work came naturally to him. As Arthur says 'The blackfellers made the stations, not the white man. And before the white man came we didn't use insecticides, killing the birds. That's why the blackfeller want their own land, with no white man about destroyin it. White men went out shootin blackfellers for sport, as if they were animals'.

Aboriginal workers accepted that they worked for their tucker and a new pair of pants when the old ones wore out.

The lack of bitterness in Arthur's account of his life is incredible but part of his make up. His sadness is for his being part-white. Being part-white meant he was wrenched from his mother at a very early age and sent to a mission where it was thought natural that his life should henceforth be one of hard labour with precious few spaces for idleness or enjoyment. Imagine yourself to be Arthur. Imagine yourself right into his life. Work from sunup until dark and fall asleep in a few chaffbags spread over the hay in the hayshed. Get right into that life. Don't just read this at a distance, comfortably. Get in there and work until you're staggering and take a few blows into the bargain.

Arthur says 'There's so much the whitefellas don't understand. They want us to be assimilated into the white but we don't want to be. They complain about our land rights but they don't understand the way we want to live. They say we shouldn't get the land but the white man's had land rights since this country was invaded, our land rights. The government is like a big dog with a bone with no meat on it. They don't want to live on that land themselves but they don't want the black man to get it either. The black man don't want to live like the white man, own this, own that. They just want to live their lives free. They don't need the white man's law they got their own. They don't need the white man to put them in goal, they can do their own punishment.'

The tie that binds the black man to his land is almost tangible. They believe. Arthur explains 'They don't have to hunt too hard - the spirit can bring birds to them, they do a rainsong and fill up the places they want, if it's cold they can bring the warm weather like the wind. Say they want a wild turkey, that turkey will come along, go past them and they can spear it. Kangaroos too. They don't kill unless they're hungry; the white man's the one who kills for sport.'

Sometimes, among poorer white folk, those who do not look to possess more than is enough, one comes across this delicacy of feeling. Generosity, a dislike of owning something denied to others, an instinct to share, to be unable to grasp that most important attribute of all civilised life, the mine and your principle. But how they stand condemned these poorer ones.

Going back to the barter system might be the answer.

Nan, who was Daisy, has a tale that is just as soul-destroying. But it did not destroy Nan's soul. She took what was dished out even when it meant twice being cast out of the household which she had served
faithfully all of her life. To make her own way. Well, she did make her own way, only to be recalled to take care of one of the older persons of the household who had fallen on helpless times.

Arthur's and Daisy's mother Annie was shared as was the custom by the owner of the station. The offspring were never acknowledged. The children knew but were careful not to speak of their parentage where white folk could hear. They knew their place, knew they must not be so cheeky. Again, place yourself in that situation, feel the pain as you are torn away from your black mother and sent far away to some place where the arrogant white man believes you will be better off. Feel the heartbreak, the scared loneliness, the utter helplessness. You do not even speak your own language. You pretend to forget it. It is something for shame.

Daisy, in Perth, and when it suits them, is treated patronisingly as one of the family. Which in fact, she is. She bears a child, Gladys. As Daisy records, without self-pity 'They get you down on the floor and won't let you get up.' Now Daisy has inside herself a core of content. Someone of her own. Gladys, her daughter; even though Gladys is sent away to the Parkerville Children's Home. At the Home Gladys finds Christ. There is no mother, no father, no family. Just Christ. Until I had ready Sally's book I had not truly understood why the mission children I met were so fervently religious.

Gladys marries a returned soldier from the second world war. She has made a sad bargain. The war has wrecked Bill Milroy mentally and physically and he becomes an alcoholic. The four children learn to deal with the inevitable. Sally's father dies. Gladys goes out to work to support her four little ones and Nan (Daisy) cares for the family. She is still servant but now she works for her own flesh and blood. She is part - truly a part - of a family. Her own.

I said over the air and I repeat here. This book should, at long last, penetrate the thick skin of all Australians, settlers and suburbanites. It should bring home to them to us - all who are living comfortably and contentedly on their land how miserably we have failed the original settlers.

Nene Gare

How to write a history which raises questions about Aboriginal past is difficult. Since the discipline of history depends upon documentation, and Aboriginal people's records do not come in the same form as documents of settlement and colonisation, then the exclusion of them from historical narratives in the past seemed to require little explanation. However, Henry Reynolds and other historians have recently shown how much useful evidence, even from the white perspective, remains, and they have demonstrated how a sensitive and imaginative approach can reveal more of the Aboriginal past than was expected.

But even here, something eludes us, for it is the conquerors telling the story. They cannot tell the story with the perspective of the Aboriginal people themselves. The past does not haunt their memories nor govern their daily lives in the same way. They do not have to keep a low profile in Australian society, terrified lest any attention might lead to the removal of their children from the family, and the consequent separation of brothers and sisters. As Mrs Morgan observed, "I've met people who were taken away in the sixties." The discipline of history offers too short a plumb line for the depths of those experiences.

Sally Morgan's book is a history, but one freed from the constraints of academic history. Told as a series of stories, it interweaves between past and present, showing how the unacknowledged past continues to shape the present. And it succeeds brilliantly in putting important questions on everyone's mental agenda about the meaning of white colonisation for Aboriginal people and those of partAboriginal descent in a way which historians can only admire.

If we approach the past in a linear fashion, starting with the idea that Australia was "settled" in 1788, then the narrative of events takes over. But the past isn't like that. It is part of our present, and Sally Morgan presents it as layer upon layer of a living daily life. The past is glimpsed over the years of the young Sally's life. Where is my place? and where do I belong? are the questions which structure her book. At the end, the reader, like Mrs Morgan, has a clearer sense of her past, but the questions remain open, and we recognise
with her that, in the end, a complete history eludes us. As her grandmother tells her, "there are some things I just can't talk 'bout" (p.351).

The problem of providing a framework to understand the stories of the past she wants to tell leads Mrs Morgan to an innovative methodology. She uses the device familiar to writers and readers of fiction, the story of a quest for personal identity. Learning about herself is the strong narrative thread through this book: so compelling, in fact, that it is hard to stop reading. We share with her a gradual process of discovery, learning to live with partial glimpses. The early chapters of the book read relatively straightforwardly. They give an account of a childhood in the Perth suburbs in the 1950s and 60s. As the child becomes an adolescent, so the answers which her mother had offered about her ancestry become less satisfying. She realises that she is not of Indian descent, but is part Aboriginal. The quest for her mother's and her grandmother's past becomes all absorbing, but her love for her mother and grandmother make some questions hard to ask. In the end, it is her love which gives her empathy. The autobiography of her grandmother, while it is the shortest of the three, can be recognised as a tribute to Sally, the grand-daughter whose love enabled her grandmother to come to terms with some aspects of her own incredibly painful past. Her grandmother, who once wanted to be white, came to acknowledge her Aboriginal heritage and her personal identity: "At least we not owned any more". Even Gladys, Sally's mother, came to feel embarrassed that "once, I wanted to be white" and to feel pride in what her Aboriginal heritage has to offer (p.306).

Mrs Morgan said, at the launching of her book, that she had tried to write without bitterness. It cannot have been easy, and in an interview with Mary Wright, she admitted that her first motivation was anger. But although she began writing out of outrage at injustice - "Somebody should put this down, people should know about these things" she found that "it's better to just put something simply and let it tell its own story". In this she has succeeded, for her stories do speak for themselves. Her narrative shows that the experience of colonisation was not a once-off experience. It was not just about white men having sexual relations with Aboriginal women. It was about a continued and continuing relationship in which the humanity of Aboriginal people was denied. Her grandmother, Daisy, became a household servant to the station-owner's family in Perth. Away from her own people, she was not allowed to keep her daughter, Gladys, but was forced to put her in the Parkerville Children's Home. Her employers made it difficult for her to see her daughter - she was not allowed much time off on the Sundays, and the public transport was not conducive to speedy journeys and eventually even in school holidays she was not allowed to have Gladys with her. While there is a theme of class, of contrasting wealth and poverty in the pastoralist and Aboriginal worlds, far stronger is the theme of inhumanity and exploitation of "family" feeling.

Women feature strongly in this history of part-Aboriginal people. Sally's grandmother, Daisy Corunna, who clearly suffered most, nevertheless emerges as a woman with a powerful compassion for others, giving food to the unemployed whites who were around suburbia in Perth in the 1930s. Yet earlier colonisation had deprived her of her name and confused her identity. "My name is Daisy Corunna, I'm Arthur's sister. My Aboriginal name is Talahue". On the station she went under the name of Daisy Brockman, and later took the name Corunna. Various myths about her father were offered her, on which she comments "Aah, you see, that's the trouble with us blackfellas, we don't know who we belong to, no one'll own up". In the end, Daisy, her daughter Gladys and her grand-daughter Sally all do know that they belong to each other, as a family group. They find a kinship network and a warm welcome from their Aboriginal relatives which they never found from their white "family". Being "family" to the Drake-Brockmans meant that although Daisy worked for them, she didn't get wages and she didn't need holidays. "How can you be family when you're a servant?" By contrast her next employers give her days off and annual leave.

Class, ethnicity and gender all play a part in structuring the daily lives of this part-Aboriginal family. Again, there are traditions of historical writing in Australia which make it difficult to raise some of these issues. Stories of mateship and nationalism direct attention away from racism, the family and from women. Mrs Morgan's story remains woman focused. Male relatives were supportive "but they just couldn't cope with the emotion".

Historians, too, have trouble with "the emotion". Trained in a discipline, they are critical of the intrusion of feelings. Is this why some work fails to capture any response from readers, why so many school students say they find history boring? Mrs Morgan deliberately chose to avoid a social historical frame of reference and to write in a different historical tradition, that of Aboriginal storytelling. In terms of making the past
alive, meaningful and accessible, there is no question that the Aboriginal tradition wins hands down. Perhaps it is time for those located in academic history departments to respond to a different historiography, and to be more open to innovation and experiments in ways of writing about the past.

Making the past visible is a beginning. Only by acknowledgement and understanding have we any hope of coming to terms with the ways in which we, as beneficiaries of a colonising exercise, continue to enjoy a lifestyle which depends upon the oppression of others. Sally Morgan’s voice is one which many people will be able to hear. She writes well, with the art which conceals art, so that a series of narratives becomes a complex exploration of the meaning of the past. And as Nene Gare has written, Sally Morgan shows how Australian people have been impoverished by their inability to come to terms with what they have done to the original settlers, the Aboriginal people.

Patricia Crawford