Peaceable Kingdom

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Just sixteen years of exposure to Christianity and my intellectual curiosity was snuffed.

I realised this last week when I arrived for work in a strange capital and stranger accommodation. I was unsurprised by the weird décor, but too tired to talk to the people I was supposed to meet and too awake to sleep. So I read the walls.

The art displayed in motels, hotels, corrugated iron red desert demountables, the prim spare rooms of friends of the arts and caravan park chic holds a grim fascination which has replaced the hole left after my tentative faith finally took flight, presumably fleeing to a more willing audience at Hillsong where it was certain to receive the full Mexican wave and swoon; the postures of certainty and the conviction of the chosen.

There were two old prints of animals and children in a style as familiar to my generation as the Hoover twin tub. The borders ran with a text I must have seen a thousand times in my life. You see it in people’s homes, old wares shops, the maudlin manse, school halls and virtuous hospitals.

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”

Both pictures were similar and the texts almost identical. The art depicted benign lambs and leopards, innocent goats and a milk-fed, chubby child leading a dangerous animal. Even the cows looked like they’d never kicked over a bucket or thought of butting the dairyman. It was called the Kingdom of the Branch.
The rest of the furniture was all old colonial bumff so I read these texts with mild interest simply because there were no jam tins handy. And then I saw in the background what I’d never noticed before. In one print, almost hidden by a bridge, was a group of figures. I stood on the bed to get a closer look. Yes, I did take my boots off. I was paying but I can’t stand vandalism. I was brought up in a family where at least two aunts owned a variety of these same prints and despised children who stood on beds.

I had never finished reading these texts in the past because I could sniff out a biblical text from ten metres and was intent on eluding the entrapments of the mild Christ and his devout followers. When I visited my aunts as a teenager I was already protesting against the Vietnam war where we were told we had God on our side and fighter planes were embellished with the Christian cross. Or Marilyn Monroe. Both intrinsic to our cultural campaigns.

I had to peer at the texts because the faux Victorian lamps were mere decorations. Up close I could see that the tiny tableau beneath the bridge was dominated by men in tricorn hats who extended their hands in Christian kindness to a group of men almost bowed in devotion: Indians with feathers, skin tunics and awed, supplicant faces.

I went to the sister print and there was a similar scene. On the opposite side of a river to where the bouncing babe was leading a retarded leopard the tricorn hats were advising Indians of their good fortune. The text of this one began, ‘When the great Penn his famous treaty made with the Indian chiefs in the elm-trees shade, the wolf and all that other nonsense laid down with whomever.’

I stared at these prints for an hour, impaled by the butterfly collector’s pin. This was the art and text of Christian colony. Every brush stroke, every word had been calculated to appease the spirit. Not the spirits of the Indians, theirs was crushed within months of meeting the hats, it was the Christian spirit needed a salve, a godly reason for taking another’s land.

I leant against the wall overwhelmed by the meticulous planning and implementation. The actual taking of the land was made possible by those Vandals and Goths, common in any society, who arrived on whaling boats and galleons. Their lust for women and gold had always made colonial transition so much easier. It was said the smallpox contagion was deliberately applied to blankets and given to resistant bands of indigenes: to infect, demoralise, depopulate and depress.
William Penn was a wealthy English Quaker who was given a tract of land which he called Pennsylvania (Penn’s woodlands). He arrived in 1681 determined to raise a community dedicated to the gentle words of the Sermon on the Mount.

He was said to deal kindly with the Indians for which they were grateful. Those on their knees are likely to be grateful for the extended hand of a gentle man. They grant Penn an extension of his land measured by an area that could be walked in a day and a half. Penn’s successors clear a path of trees and logs and train athletes to run as far as they can in a day and a half. In relay. They claim 1200 square miles of land.

It wasn’t Penn’s intention to claim so much but his ‘treaty’ with the Indians could only be forged because the Indians by 1684 had become impoverished and powerless. He couldn’t be blamed for the actions of his descendants but it says a lot about the ability of the Sermon on the Mount to saturate the Christian soul.

Those who wrought the relay ruse of land acquisition were now represented in this West Brisbane guest house by a chubby and angelic child whose conquest of savage beasts, who quivered to nuzzle the child’s plump paw, represented the conquest of the Americas by Christians. The savage spirit quelled and brought to heal by the mildest of restraint.

I stared and I stared. The elaborate performance and explanation of colony was deeply embedded in both the Bible and the church and we are lulled into believing the story by tracts as pervasive as the chubby child’s personal circus. My aunts, attempting sanctity, had adorned their walls with similar prints and at the same time condemned their ancestors’ history to be reworked by athletic coaches and the painters of pastel Sunday school posters.

I stepped off the bed, put my boots on and walked into the balm of a Brisbane spring. I bought Indian curry and naan and two frosty beers and returned to the veranda of the guest house to consume the meal while overlooking a darkening garden of palm and fern and fruit bat.

The beads of frost slipped down the flank of my Tasmanian beer and I considered myself. Me, the radical, the provocateur, the sage of history and cynicism and I’d completely underestimated the calculated pervasion of the British colonial myth.

We’d been fed this pap of propaganda since our eyes could focus and our ears could recognise words. Many of us bore the names of famous Christians, the songs
our mothers sang while baking apple pie were preparing us for our delusion. The mere presence of sacred babies lulled us into the complacency of acceptance.

Isaiah was preparing us for a Golden Age when snakes would not bite, lambs and lions would cuddle up and war would be no more. Lovely. In Job we read that ‘you will have a covenant with the stones of the field, and the wild animals will be at peace with you.’ Isaiah also claimed, ‘He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.’ Lovelier still; a sylvan paradise.

Ezekiel said ‘I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety.’ So the Christian would compensate for God’s bad halo days and rid the earth of dangerous beasts and tame the land. For Christians. The implication is clear. Penn cautioned his followers that there is only one God and only Christians can expect to inhabit the Golden Age of peace and kindness, all others will be converted … or lost.

When Edward Hicks began his series of paintings on the subject of lambs and leopards, fatlings and innocence, he was painting from a deep Quaker belief, but at a time when he was disquieted by the failure of his fellow Quakers to live in harmony with each other.

Despite his concerns, however, he has interpreted the Bible correctly; it calls for man’s dominion over all the wild beasts and places. Regardless of the presence of other peoples in those wild places all Christians presumed that it was their duty to defeat nature and soothe the savage breast.

The curry was good, the beer was better, the night a balm of silk to the skin. But old misery guts chewed the rag of history. Australian history.

Most of our ‘explorers’ were devout Christians but many experienced dark nights of the soul when hints of regret briefly illuminated their conscience. The Aboriginal Protector, George Augustus Robinson, was beguiled by the night fishing fleets of Aborigines on the Murray River and you can feel how tantalised he was by the word civilization. He resisted the allure successfully but he was always conscious that the colonial presence was poisonous to the Indigenous population and had no intention of providing justice for them. His own ministrations, of course, he considered the actions of divine grace.
Thomas Mitchell rode through villages of over one thousand Aboriginal people and envied the grace, comfort and individuality of their homes, but his admiration always succumbed to his assumption that this way of life had to give way to Christian industry.

Mitchell observed fields of harvested grain that reached to the horizon but it was months before he realised, or admitted in his diary, that this was an act of industry.

Charles Sturt was near death when his most blinding realisation of Aboriginal achievement furrowed his Christian brow. One of his party was already dead and scurvy had loosened the pallets and blinded the eyes of the rest. His few surviving horses could only walk in straight lines if they were not to stumble and fall.

On top of a sand dune in the dead heart of Australia he was hailed by 500 Aborigines. He can barely make them out, such is the progress of his disease, but the horses stagger down the dune and Sturt is aware that if the Aborigines have aggressive intent his whole party is doomed.

Instead, the people bring coolamons of water to slake the thirst of the ‘explorers’ and then, gingerly, hold out those coolamons to the horses, a creature they have never seen.

The explorers are given roast duck and cakes. Not a bad desert as deserts go. Tubs of well water are set beside the new houses they choose from within this large town, they are provided with kindling for their fire and more cakes, the finest Sturt has ever tasted.

Lying on his bed that night Sturt can see the winking fires of all the houses spread across the Warburton valley. He is enchanted by the laughter and singing as the little town prepares its meals. Women grind grain into flour and Sturt reports the enchantment of the soft whirring of the mills as if it were a fable of peace. The Golden Age. By ten o’clock the village is silent and at rest. An almost Christianly civility.

But Sturt was aware that any entreaty he might make on behalf of these people would fall on the ears of men who had not lain down with the lamb. How were those women to know that the whisk of their mills was an anthem of doom?

Hicks painted his Golden Age idylls and plucked verses from the Bible to declare the loveliness of the future for Christians.
I went back to my room, my mind running with these thoughts, took off my boots like my aunts would have me do, and stood on the bed to look at the paintings again. I didn’t know Edward Hicks from a bar of soap that night, I did not know the verses had come from Isaiah, but I looked at the angle of the Christian hands and how the Indians meekly bent their necks and I knew that this was how we explained ourselves. Afterwards.

Did we really believe in a Golden Age or were we happier to give its name to a hotel, utilising the heavy irony of the sub-editors from the Age newspaper who drank there and fashioned within its walls one of the more debauched hotels of Melbourne?

I realised I was in no mood for the polite, ruminative laments on black fate by white writers, but at the appointed time, a time my parents and aunts adored, I walked down the hill through the hub of old West End. A woman, stiffened with MS and hectic with need, was begging for $7.50 to restore her mobile phone to credit. Blackfellas in doorways responded to a hand signal with one hand while cradling a bottle in the other. The Golden Age.

West End was being gentrified; these beggars and paupers would soon be evicted not just from their house but from the suburb. That’s why it could now afford a refined bookshop, refined talk and tapas.

I tried to rally for the sisters who read their verse and memoir, clapped the white ladies in their five hundred dollar dresses, there was neither an unworthy word read, nor an unkind thought in the courtyard of that benign bookshop. But the Branch bent above us all and dripped its sanctity in translucent pearls. Penn would have seen his mission vindicated, Edward Hicks would have lifted his brush to one of the hundred versions he painted of the quieted beasts and the ring-leading chubby child.

For whom is the Golden Age reserved? The athletic coaches who devised a ruse no better than the man who buys shares at half price from old people addled with oncoming dementia? The man who bought Melbourne for a handful of beads and promised goods which were never delivered?

Was there a time, or will there ever be such time, when men will not be craven? As I trudged up Boundary Street I was allowed safe passage by the rap hall patrons who stepped aside to avoid the spectre of one whose age they could not comprehend.
‘Aint gunna study war no more, aint gunna study war no more,’ we sang in the seventies, pleased to have rescued the lyrics from ‘my little bright eyed doll’, and convinced a song would lead us into the golden age. But the words are from the traditional Negro rendition of Isaiah’s ‘nor will they train for war anymore.’ Is it impossible for us to escape the Bible?

Back on the veranda with the bats and palms I stared into the darkness that was heavy with tropical perfumes and stitched by the stridulations of insects. War and faith, war and faith, the Bible was full of its contest, or the use of one to justify the other.

The tricorn hats in Hicks’ paintings had only offered the kindly hand once the war was over and the treaty bargains had been made certain. My eye roamed over the lovely architectural features of the old timber guest house. Octagonal turrets had been constructed in three positions on the roof above the veranda to direct cooler draughts onto the deck. A trick learned in the colonies of India and America and repeated here in our version of colonial architecture; to cool the heads of governors and million acre graziers.

This grand old house had been one of the first mansions on this side of the Brisbane River and had housed an assortment of government officials and gentry and was styled for those with languid grace. For years it had hosted dinners and balls for visiting British dignitaries, the machinery of colonialism, or as the Wiradjuri writer, Jeanine Leane would have it, the British diaspora. You couldn’t turn a corner of the many corridors without some artistic or textual reference to the Bible. This house had once been at the heart of Britain’s triumphant victory over the savage.

The savage that milled grain in a susurration of stone against stone, the savage that sang and laughed at the end of the day, that could design a house to reflect her personality (Mitchell believed it was the women who made the design choices), that could dine on roast duck and cake, and sip cool well water in a place we have since named Sturt’s Stony Desert.

A publishing house charged with the study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture has been arguing with me for years about the existence of Aboriginal agricultural industries. Many of the accepted experts on Aboriginal history are spooked when the word agriculture is used for acts which they have declared, in their certainty, hunting and gathering.
Bill Gammage’s recent work declares that Australia was a managed Aboriginal landscape. *The Biggest Estate* has been very well received so perhaps we are becoming more curious, less reflexively panicked by questions about our historical assumptions.

Let’s hope so, but those leather patch professors were also driven to dyspepsia by my discussion of the absence of war in Aboriginal Australia. What about the nulla nulla they cried, what about the killer boomerang? But I wasn’t talking about that grand old human predilection to murder, I was talking about land war, colonial war.

The stability of Australian first languages over periods as old as 60,000 years is testament, not just of diplomatic restraint, but to the trans-continental agreement to live on and protect particular portions of the land. Remaining so long on discrete districts allowed the continuance of over 350 individual languages.

If land war erupts every 40-50 years, as it has in Europe and Asia, smaller, weaker units are obliterated or absorbed and their words gobbled by the dominant language.

If our grain harvesters, fish processors and fruit preservers had been charged with the custodianship of particular river systems and ranges, and their whirring mills had been sibilant every evening across the ages, the songs they sang at dawn and dusk would be rich with reference to their preserve and the language would become a reflection of the environment.

Any student of Aboriginal languages will become aware, as the speakers have always been, that each language has a distinct sound and intonation. It might resemble sister languages strung along the songlines like beads on a necklace, but it remains distinct because of the land on which the speakers dwell and for which no other people have the same depth of knowledge or responsibility.

Was that the Golden Age? Can it be the template for a new Golden Age? Responsibility for the land not ownership or the wealth it can create?

Oh, Eddie Hicks I love your oxen, I think your lambs are the cuddliest little moccasins I’ve ever seen, your chubby child could surely sell Snugglers’ nappies today. It would be nice if the vipers didn’t bite and the leopard never stalked; but that’s how your God made them, Eddie. I’d love to talk to you about this because the final word of any Christian I’ve discussed creation with is that when in doubt you must have faith. I had faith in Andrew Johns the disgraced rugby player, I had
faith that Jim Cassidy just rode horses not organised their performances with Tony Mokbel, I never had faith in Lance Armstrong but was asked to by beneficiaries of his charity. I was told to have faith and ignore the paedophile church leaders. I don’t have a good record with faith.

I can’t see the harm in someone believing in Mohammad, someone else in Christ, another in the sanctity of cows, another in the spiritual efficacy of the sun, yet another in a little boy numerically designated as the Holy One, but it’s when a disciple decides that one God is sillier than his own and therefore must cede his land and life. That’s when faith deserts.

If our religions insisted on adherence to gentle codes of behaviour and observance we might live longer and better. The incorporation of the mysteries of the universe and life into earthly existence is one thing, to exclude and punish those whose explanation of those mysteries is fractionally different is another.

To use those explanations as an excuse to steal from others is a simple, transparent and abominable device.

I am fascinated by faith. I had the immense and accidental good fortune to be on the same train as Fred Chaney, ex-parliamentarian and Deputy Leader of the Australian Liberal party, as we were on our way to visit the art galleries of Rome and Milan.

Fred is an intellectual, a Christian intellectual. He dashed from one iconic work to the next telling the history of each in vivid detail. His enthusiasm for his culture was entrancing, his quiet love for his family an inspiration.

Those couple of days taught me a lot about history and goodness but did not loosen one brick of my faith in country. Later, wandering around a Byzantine church on Torcello, Venice, my new knowledge re-enforced my belief that the Eurasian religious habit of war, rape and pillage could not justify the rich objects of its culture.

A belief which requires the severing of babies’ heads and slicing unborn infants from wombs by swings of the righteous sword encourages not just bigotry and violence but also selfishness and disregard for the humanity of others.

The commercial and political ethics which produced Nazi Germany, Pol Pot’s Cambodia and the Global Financial Crisis are all excused in the minds of the perpetrators by their right to despise others for tiny differences or simply the opportunity to inflict harm.
Fragments of that intolerance can be seen in the paybacks and punishments of Aboriginal Australia, but the restraint of these traits, which are so common to the human spirit, is the land itself. Traditional, pre-colonial, Aboriginal faith is embedded in the land and the responsibility for one particular district prevents all but the most fleeting outbreaks of violence. Soon the land calls back those it has created to observe the necessary functions of custodianship of the land, that particular piece of land and no other.

If in all societies and religions created by humans there is another more likely to survive a few thousand years it seems unknown to history or faith.

I’m biased but I yearn for that Golden Age where people stayed at home and harvested their grain in peace. And sang at dusk as they turned the bounty into cake. Artists paint those scenes today, venerating the peaceable land, but unlike Edward Hicks, don’t need to paint a hidden miniature beneath a bridge or branch to explain how they came to own the land of others.

That’s why I stood on the bed for so long, Aunt, I was lost in wonder. Not certainty, but the calm security of doubt. Wonder is the mainspring of hope and justice, certainty is the excuse for its murder.