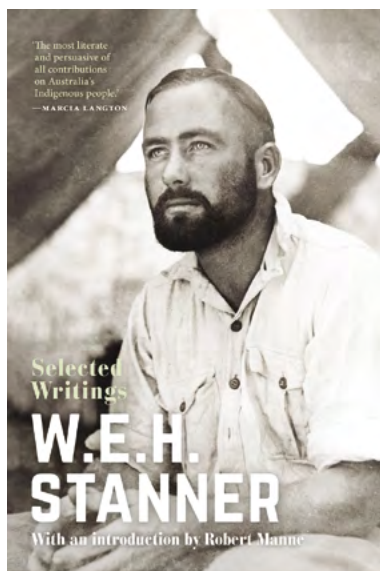


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W. E. H. Stanner: Selected Writings

By **W. E. H. Stanner**

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Who knew it would be so interesting? Stanner's famous phrase, 'The Great Australian Silence,' is almost totemically mouthed by recent historians as a prelude to yet another text that promises to break 'the silence'. Almost always, this silence is about frontier violence, but for Stanner it was much more.

The great Australian silence is about more than just overlooking the violent expansion of the frontier. It is mostly about indifference to, and ignorance of, the destruction of traditional Aboriginal culture. Violence is not even the main villain; for Stanner, pastoralism is 'the worst'. But not in the way one might think.

Stanner returns in his writing to three core silences in our history. First, the allure of easy reliance on whites that was the most invidious. This 'intelligent parasitism' saw Aboriginal groups make a calculated exchange—steady dependence in place of the hardship of traditional hunter-gathering with its frequent hungry seasons worsened by resource competition and dislocation. Stanner implores Australian readers to give credit to Aboriginal agency, even if it means accepting, as so many Aboriginal people did, that the preferred option was to live on a 'rotting frontier, with the smell of old failure, vice and decadence' (p.12). He outlines the humbugging: Indigenous workers had hangers-on demanding shared benefits; the proffering of Indigenous women to whites 'always led to a payment ... and might lead to a steady real income if it could be turned into a squeeze-play against a captured protector' (p.29).

Stanner argues that this drift to dependency often preceded the arrival of whites, and that more would have drifted to the periphery

of white Australia had their progress not been blocked by Aboriginal groups unwilling to give passage to those attempting to trouble their monopoly over handouts, Western goods and vices. It was not just violence and disease that fractured Aboriginal society, but the 'almost equally fatal goodwill of Europeans' (p.151); for 'every Aboriginal who ... had Europeans thrust upon him, at least one other had sought them out' (p.152). It's hard not to hear the echoes to this day.

Second, Stanner is relentless in his criticism of Australians' indifference to Aboriginal cultural destruction, and wants to 'evoke public interest in the Aborigines' life-fate' (p.9). He charts the slow awareness of Indigenous cultural depth, but as his 1963 lecture outlines, the history of indifference was watered by early disparaging observations and fertilised by growing familiarity, leading to the 'beginnings of the scorn and dislike of [Aboriginal peoples], and the indifference to their fate, which were to become so strongly characteristic of Australian mentality' (p.116).

Stanner is a sympathetic champion of Aboriginal sophistication and cultural complexity, and calls for 'the appreciation of difference' (p.193). This was—at least in his more anthropological essays, rather than his Boyer Lectures (which became progressively more wordy and, for this reader, boring)—a repeated focus, unsurprising for an anthropologist. Stanner points to a third 'great silence', lamenting that Indigenous 'wealth of mythology ... has been allowed to die unrecorded with unkempt old men in their squalid camps on fringes of so many country towns'. What is left is a 'low culture' (p.33): a thin remnant of a richer

tradition. Traditions continue, but the deepest were lost.

His clear concern is to be an interlocutor between an historically indifferent Australian modernity and the Aboriginal people caught between 1960s Australia and a pre-settlement Aboriginal way of life. He boldly and unhesitatingly describes just how different this world and its worldviews were.

To a 2025 reader, Stanner's essays rupture our current silences about those less politically correct aspects of the Aboriginal past: polygamy, gendered hierarchies, the use of rape as punishment, and indiscriminate killings for imagined sorcery. Stanner rightly demands that we view Aboriginal practices through the lens of Indigenous cultural mores, but he also casts a refreshingly sober eye over them. He, for instance, describes internal cultural practices as one in

which 'the narrow self-interest of men exploits The Dreaming ... [There is] plenty of ... malice, enmity, bad faith, and violence running along the lines of sex-inequality and age-inequality' (p.72). There was no Australian Eden.

So, quite unexpectedly, Stanner is not just a lone 1960s voice calling out past historical omissions to a disinterested Australia; it turns out he was also speaking to us now. Rather than conceal less palatable (to many) cultural practices and mindsets of traditional Aboriginal society, let's listen to Stanner who wants us to know the past's complexities—not the present's politically correct conveniences.

I suspect Stanner is not just writing about the past when he notes that 'the damage to our appreciation of Aboriginal life really came from the men of the armchair, who wrote from afar under a kind of enchantment' (p.199). Our histories and

anthropologies have always been in thrall to 'intellectual fashions exotic to itself' (p.203).

History teachers will find much to awaken them from our current 'enchanted' view of the past, and this book helped remind me that a fuller history of the past requires more than homilies to an imagined 'noble savage' cruelly assaulted by imperial malice. More complex Indigenous pasts informed later patterns of relationships that do not fit convenient discourses but are still essential parts of the story.

Maybe our current paternalistic censorship of politically awkward Indigenous cultural practices and our drift towards an authorised 'truth-told' version of Australian history heavy on violence and victimhood could be called the second 'Great Australian Silence.'

That's what I heard Stanner say.