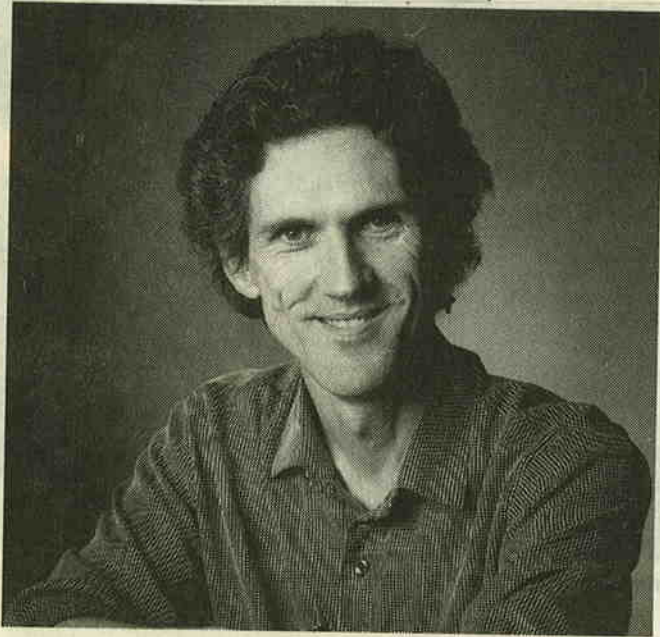


Trying to restore Aboriginality into our history

Writer Craig Cormick has a deep personal sense of the need for reconciliation, he tells Christopher Bantick.



Craig Cormick: stretching the bounds of imagination.

Photograph: Steve Keough

The rewriting of our history will come from our creative writers.

— Manning Clark

PROLIFIC is a word which comes to mind when describing Canberra's Craig Cormick. He is a well-established short-story writer with more than 50 published in newspapers, magazines and anthologies. Several of these have won awards. He is an editor of *Blast*, the radical arts magazine, and last year he published *Pimplemania*, a book for children.

This year he received first prize in the Max Harris Literary Award and the Arts West Short Story Competition. Last year he achieved a Canberra Critics Circle award for literature.

His new collection of short stories, *Unwritten Histories*, is what he calls his first book for grown-ups. The 18 stories all take a bead on Australian history and address the issue of restoring Aboriginality into history from where it has been displaced. Cormick has a long-standing interest in Aboriginal issues.

"I guess it is something which has always been there. The stories have come from me as a need to understand and express Aboriginality in Australia's history. I attended the Aboriginal Reconciliation Commission in Melbourne. This was a profound influence on me. Reconciliation can be on an individual level. I also wanted to say through the stories that we should know Aborigi-

nal history as part of Australian history." Each story uses the basic structure of an event recorded in history and then extracts from it the imaginative potential for including an Aboriginal perspective. This is not appropriation.

Cormick is both aware and sensitive of how Aborigines have been represented in the past and is ambitious to correct this. He does not dispute that he is rewriting history, but is careful to clarify his intentions.

"There are historians like Henry Reynolds who effectively rewrite history and offer an Aboriginal position. For me there is a similar starting point, except that in fiction you can go a bit further.

"An historian has to look at reinterpreting historical facts and find out what they can tell them. A fiction writer can take facts and then say 'What if?' and look at a new way of interpreting those facts. You can stretch the bounds of the imagination as I have done with some stories, like *Terra Nullis — the Unknown Country*, the Cook story. You can take it beyond that and say, 'Cook could have' or 'Cook might have'."

The collection will make people think about how Australian history has not only been recorded with the writing out of Aboriginal presence, but also how this is passed on. Cormick is passionate about the primacy of an inclusive Australian history.

His research for the stories is extensive and is largely reflective of, where possible, journal entries. He is unambiguous about what he wants readers to receive from the stories.

"The point is that from the reader's point of view, they are reading an alternative view of history that the reader knows may or may not be true. It sets out the premise very quickly whether it is absurd or whether it is not. It makes them re-think that history."

One of the most intriguing elements of the stories is how Cormick has introduced the language recorded at the time — discovered in journals and other sources — and bonded it into his imaginative account.

"The language of the stories had to be from the journals. I wanted to capture the thinking of the time and through it challenge a contemporary audience about how we think about the past. These are not 18th-century stories, but 20th-century stories. What I am highlighting is that it is important to get into the heads of such characters as Burke and Wills, to reassess attitudes and actions."

Cormick does not see himself reconstructing the past. Bringing to life the unwritten histories of the Aboriginal people and repositioning them in the context of the past is his aim. He sees the creative writer's imagination as having a particular role in the practice of history.

"History is no longer set in concrete. The imagination can take this further. People know that the short-story form is not a document of history as such. They can read and learn at the same time. There is

great potential for the short story in Australia. The type of collection *Unwritten Histories* is has a role in other ways. It may be more accessible to people than history."

One of the central issues in the writing of the stories, Cormick says, was representing the Aboriginal past with integrity and sensitivity. He was reluctant to adopt the black point of view in the stories. Recognition is there, but not appropriation. This in itself provided some questions for him as a creative writer.

"There is a very big debate about whether a white person can presume to write from a black point of view. Does it insult Aboriginal people to do it? Can they do it well? It is possible. But is it ethical? From my point of view, it is not ethical. It breaches that point of ethics when it is an insult to the people that you are representing.

"If the people you are representing say, 'That's okay — you can do that,' I think you haven't breached ethics. If the people you are representing do not approve of the way you are representing them, then that is a breach of ethics. That is the point of crossover. I was very concerned about this and I was very happy that it was Aboriginal Studies Press who picked up the book."

This is an important and original book. It deserves and needs to be read widely.

Unwritten Histories, by Craig Cormick (Aboriginal Studies Press, 188pp, \$19.95) was launched yesterday in Canberra by Jackie Huggin, of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unit at the University of Queensland.