

Since the 1970s the mantra that school education should be 'relevant' and driven by students' interests and experiences has been rarely questioned. It has been widely accepted among education faculties and government departments and agencies that all knowledge is fluid and open to interpretation. The process of learning has been elevated above content to the extent that only a handful of states actually teach courses called geography and history. Thanks in no small part to Donnelly, more and more people are acknowledging that the pendulum has swung too far away from the traditions of education that have served Western societies well.

Donnelly's mission to restore 'the best that has been thought and said' to school education is a worthy one and *Dumbing Down* is an important contribution towards that goal.

Reviewed by Jennifer Buckingham

Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men's Violence Against Women and Children

by Louis Nowra

Pluto Press

North Melbourne, 2007

\$17.95, 102pp

ISBN 9780980292404

'A lot of people use the word racist too easily,' then ALP President Warren Mundine told a recent public forum on Louis Nowra's essay *Bad Dreaming*. 'I don't think that calling someone racist will wash away the issues. Anyone who thinks that Aboriginal communities don't have domestic violence or child abuse problems is kidding themselves.'

Racist is certainly something that author and playwright Louis Nowra has been tagged since he published *Bad Dreaming*, a reportage-style essay on domestic violence and child sexual abuse in indigenous communities. Professor Larissa Berendt, for example, protested to *The Age* that 'what you are left with is the impression, whether he means it or not, that violence is part of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal people haven't done enough to stop it.' Professor Mick Dodson also objected that Nowra had failed to understand how Aboriginal systems of policing and behaviour differed from Western notions.

The issue of indigenous violence has been particularly charged since Northern Territory Crown Prosecutor Nanette Rogers went public with her concerns on the ABC's *Lateline* programme in May last year. Nowra is also not indigenous, but he grew up with domestic violence and has

collected newspaper clippings about violence in indigenous communities since the 1980s. He accepts that his essay, particularly where it deals with indigenous culture, has upset some people. But he insists that he is not making moral judgments about traditional behaviour and he argues that the problem lies in the 'pathological distortion of what was traditional'. What drove him to write the book is that 'at its dark unwholesome core', he says, 'it's a man's problem.'

Certainly Nowra leaves us in no doubt as to the dark unwholesomeness of the core. Much of the essay unfurls by way of storytelling—horrific brutal stories of the treatment of women and children by men, both in their communities and again in the criminal justice system. While the stories almost start to overwhelm the essay, Nowra does not lose sight of his three main contentions.

First, he argues, violence against women featured in traditional indigenous culture; child sexual abuse did not. Second, we—governments and sundry bystanders—have shielded the perpetrators of the violence by refusing to criticise aspects of Aboriginal culture and by applying a separate judicial standard that has allowed the perpetrators to get away with rape and murder. And finally, he contends, 'if there is a contradiction between women's rights and indigenous rights, then one must say that women's rights should take priority in our society.'

What makes these points so contentious is the fundamental division in indigenous affairs between what Cape York leader



Noel Pearson has called 'two ideological tribes': one advocating a rights-based agenda and the other pushing a responsibilities-based agenda. (Pearson sees himself and Mundine as advocating 'a synthesis of the rights and responsibilities paradigm' and thus 'intolerably stretched trying to straddle the ideological gulf.') Nowra acknowledges the issue of rights, but it is responsibilities that he wants to talk about in this essay.

Of course, though I find that the stories do not lose their power to shock in the retelling, the plot is all too familiar to those in the field. As Professor Peter Sutton remarked in *The Australian*, 'there is unfortunately nothing new in Louis Nowra's revelations. They swept Queensland in 1999 and the rest of the country very publicly in 2001 and again in 2006.' Certainly most, if not all, of the stories were reported in *The Australian* and sometimes other newspapers at the time. Indeed, indigenous violence has been the subject of some 40 reports since 1999, among them, the Boni Robertson report in Queensland in 2000, the Gordon report in Western Australian in 2002, and the *Breaking the Silence* report in New South Wales in 2006.

But it is the non-indigenous male voice—introduced into what has been a taboo debate—that makes this essay striking. It is familiar territory for Sutton, who himself has written about how pre-colonisation social and cultural factors have contributed to the problems that indigenous communities now face and how tagging non-indigenous voices as racist to exclude them from discussion has backfired.

For me, the greatest weakness of the essay lies in the final chapter on the way forward. I wanted to

hear something new and many of Nowra's recommendations have been made time and time again, to no avail. Where Nowra does take a stronger line than most is individual responsibility. He exhorts men in the judicial system to recognise that 'human rights come before cultural rights' and exhorts men in the communities to 'take on individual responsibility and confront the perpetrators of violence.' Disappointingly, Nowra does not bridge the subject of how to cause men to take responsibility for the issue of violence. Men may be 'the problem and the solution', but how to move from problem to solution is no clearer.

The essay relied heavily on second-hand accounts and, as a reader, I would have liked footnotes to give greater weight to what otherwise might be too easily dismissed as mere assertion. (I was happy to learn that Nowra, through Pluto Press, will be making the footnotes available on the internet.) If the point of this essay is to open the issue up to a wider audience, and a non-indigenous audience, it is important that the evidential base be open and transparent.

Nevertheless, it is a powerful story and Nowra knows his craft. People, both indigenous and non-indigenous, may not want to hear what he has to say but, to my mind, the debate is the better for his voice.

Reviewed by Kirsten Storry

Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present

by **Michael B. Oren**

W.W. Norton

London, 2007

\$49.95, 672pp

ISBN 9780393058260

One of the risks of writing a history of America in the Middle East is that the current political climate will influence the presentation of the past. It could be very easy to adopt an imperialistic interpretation of America's participation in Middle Eastern affairs from 1776 onwards, as it would be to view America's role over the last two centuries as one of liberators and freedom fighters.

To a degree, Oren has not made this mistake. The book is a genuine effort to document America's relationship with the Middle Eastern region, from its independence up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It is clear however that underlying Oren's history is an attempt to explain America's current predicament by analysing the difficulties of America's Middle Eastern policies of the past.

Oren does so by establishing three themes: power, faith, and fantasy, also the title of the book. These themes reflect not only a summary of America's relationship with the Orient but a seemingly repeated pattern of events and attitudes that have occurred since explorer John Ledyard became the first American to visit the region.

Our first glimpse of America's struggle for power, in the Middle East, are the events of the Barbary Wars and America's naval effort to free itself from constant attacks by Arab Pirates off the coast of North Africa. The American victory gave