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Prologue

The seeds of this book lie in the dusty margins of the Riverina and the Western plains of New South Wales, in a vast place I now know as Wiradjuri country. More immediately, they lie in a small country town 500 kilometres west of Sydney, in the 1950s and 1960s. My schooldays overlapped the so-called Menzies era when, to paraphrase Russel Ward, affection for our 'white nation' and for the British Empire were for most Australians complementary sentiments.

We schoolkids thought the familiar patterns of rural life normal, comfortable, reassuring. We hardly noticed that Aboriginal families sat only in the front stalls of our grandly named Tivoli picture theatre; that in a neighbouring town, much larger than ours, the black kids gathered outside the fence that denied them entry to the local swimming pool; or that most of the men in the travelling boxing tent at the annual town show, or the shearers in the woolsheds, or the 'domestic help' on the surrounding farms, were Aboriginal, 'black'. Yet we did know that Aboriginal families seemed always to live on the fringes of town; that their children left school early; their parents died young.

We knew, too, that there were church missions and government reserves—but these were further west, near 'The Lake' and the Lachlan, faint reminders of my country's segregating history. The rough-chipped stone axe-head half exposed in the sandy creek bed in the bottom paddock of the family farm hinted at a much earlier history—of Indigenous occupation and industry, and loss.

For us 'white' kids the marginalisation of Indigenous people was an unproblematic sign of a seemingly natural social order. Australia was an outpost of orderly European settlement, not a brutal example of invasion or dispossession. A complacent racism underpinned our world-view. Our

nation was an extension of the Empire—Christian, democratic and white. Oblivious to deep local histories, the maps of the world on our schoolroom walls coloured Australia, along with much of Africa and Asia, in imperial pink. We celebrated Empire Day with bonfires and fireworks and glimpsed the Queen when she toured her far-flung Dominion.

In the aftermath of global war the interwoven strands of Empire, whiteness and nation began to unravel. An insular Australia was buffeted by the winds of change—international pressures that it could not easily ignore or deflect. European colonialism and racialised discrimination faced unprecedented challenges. Contests over Apartheid in Southern Africa greatly sharpened these forces. The politics of race at home and abroad were joined. The insular country of my youth gave way, however unwillingly, to the pressures challenging 'white supremacy' everywhere.

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