A SENSE OF PLACE AND A SENSE OF HISTORY

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I'm watching a video on YouTube featuring two Aboriginal students from the University of Sydney being interviewed about racial stereotypes. Towards the end of the film the students, Simone Armstrong a Bundjalung woman and Bianca Williams a Barkindji woman, are asked what's the best part about being Indigenous. "Being black and deadly" they reply in unison, and then both burst out laughing.

I've been trying to improve my knowledge of Indigenous issues recently and unsurprisingly the laughs are few and far between. Mabo, the Uluru Statement, Native Title, the Stolen Generation, Change the Date, the absence of a Treaty... the list goes on. So many issues to get your head and heart around, each one vitally important, each one similarly slow in the long journey towards reconciliation. I'm not going to dwell on the politics here, we're all aware of the harsh reality and what the Government referred to last year as the *national shame* when carrying out the twelve-year review of the Closing the Gap initiative. The recent documentary, *The Australian Dream*, about Adam Goodes, brought these issues into sharp focus for a global audience.

In my research I was sifting through these honest, but ultimately depressing narratives, searching for some hope and encouragement, perhaps even some signposts pointing to the direction that we in the wine community could take to be better allies.

Before diving into these deep waters, I should provide some context and also explain why an Englishman thinks he should dip his toe into the shallows. For the last twelve years I've been running the James Busby Travel trips for overseas buyers, in which time I've talked to hundreds of Australian wineries and wine industry stakeholders across all the major wine producing regions. This privileged and quite unique position has meant I'd have been well placed to hear the conversation around Indigenous history and acknowledgment in the Australian wine community if it was going on, but with the notable exception of a few clear voices such as Sue Bell, Jane Ferrari, Max Allen and Mike and Marc Bennie, the conversation is, for the most part, still pretty quiet.

This observation isn't meant to criticise anyone or point the finger, the reality is that travelling through Australia's wine regions today it's hard to imagine a time before there were vines. The footprints of those who came before are simply not visible on the landscape anymore. The world's longest living culture, that survived, thrived and maintained custodianship of the land for over 60,000 years, is out of sight and, as a consequence, often out of mind.

To look beyond the recent horizon and appreciate the debt owed to the traditional owners of the land takes a leap of the imagination, and not a small dose of courage as it requires putting your head above the parapet, and the risk of getting some things wrong in the process. In recent years wineries such as Cullen and Schmölzer & Brown have made that leap and started to include an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land on their back labels. Vanya Cullen tells me, "The acknowledgment on the label is a small yet powerful shift in consciousness. It's saying no one owns the land and the traditional custodians were here first with sustainable landcare for over 65,000 years in Wilyabrup." She also tells me that they've been working with the local Indigenous organisation the Undalup Association to learn more about their culture and connection to Country. Vanya says they've done cultural training for all their staff, which was "a very powerful and beautiful experience".

Tessa Brown, from Schmölzer & Brown, says, "Acknowledgement is bare minimum. We are colonisers, we bring a European heritage because that's our background and it's hard to look past that when we talk about how we intend to farm. Sometimes it feels like the next generation's job because blending the European and the Indigenous agricultural wisdom feels

beyond our grasp. Hopefully though, we have a fair bit more life left and can continue to learn and adapt and do better."

We've been trying to *do better* ourselves on the James Busby Travel trips in recent years and have introduced a number of Indigenous educational and cultural events. These have included a bush walk with Wadandi man Josh Whiteland of Koomal Dreaming in Margaret River and a round table lunch organised by Mac Forbes and Max Allen with Aunty Joy Wandin, a Wurundjeri elder in the Yarra Valley. Mike and Melissa Brown at Gemtree are working with Kaurna man Karl Telfer to deliver cultural tours on their Ecotrail, while on our most recent tour Luke Lambert and Rosalind Hall gifted each of our guests a copy of *Dark Emu*. On that same tour we invited all participating wineries to provide an Acknowledgement of Country upon arrival. The Busby website has also been recently redesigned to include acknowledgement of, and information about, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Despite this, I'm mindful of the fact that we're running a wine tour not a cultural exchange, the opportunity for including Indigenous events and information will always remain limited, but that shouldn't stop us from making an effort to try and *do better*.

It would be easy to dismiss gestures such as acknowledgement speeches or a paragraph on a back label as tokenistic, but that misses the point. There is a very real debt owed to the people that came before us and acted as custodians of the land that we farm today. The absence of such small but meaningful gestures in recent publications from the industry's peak bodies is noticeable. Wine Australia's recent *Strategic Plan 2020-25* didn't contain a single reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, while the *Vision 2050* document (Australian Grape & Wine) contains a single sentence, under workforce diversity. If producers can devote space on a back label and on their websites for a respectful acknowledgment, you'd think our peak bodies could do better. Unless they think it's got nothing to do with them?

If any industry in Australia should be taking the lead on Indigenous acknowledgement it should be wine. We're the agricultural sector that talks about connection to place and stewardship of the land. An Indigenous understanding of Country and land management could inform and enrich our European concept of sustainable viticulture and terroir. Dreamtime stories of the local peoples could add layers of complexity and richness when told alongside our own producer-centric narratives. In a recent article in the *Financial Review*, Max Allen interviews Ray Nadeson of Lethbridge Wines in Geelong. "Cultural change is not a steady progression. It comes in steps, and this moment feels like one of those steps," Nadeson tells Allen. This is echoed by Cullen who describes their work with Indigenous issues to me as, "A few steps at a time, but so much more to do". It may not always be easy to reach out to the representatives of the Indigenous people in the area, but as Cullen discovered, not only can it be incredibly rewarding, but also avoids the risk of cultural appropriation. The act of engagement in itself is a gesture of respect, a small step of reconciliation.

Learning about your local Indigenous history and culture is not only the right thing to do, it's also a real point of difference when talking to customers overseas, and one from which all stakeholders can benefit. You don't have to have an iconic vineyard or ancient vines to be able to share stories about the traditional owners of the land, the opportunity exists for all wineries, large or small, old or new. Nowadays we expect trade buyers to ask about the use of chemicals in the vineyard or the carbon footprint of a bottle. For the new generation coming up you can add to that list questions about cultural matters such as racial equality and reconciliation. This is the Greta Thunberg generation, they are much more aware, more *woke*, to social injustice in all forms, be it Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement, or potentially, the rights of First Nation peoples.

This post-China, post-Covid moment represents a chance for a hard reset on the stories we tell, both to ourselves and to others. Gaining a better understanding of the length of Indigenous history in this country, and a respect and understanding of the issues of appropriation and reconciliation that surround it, might provide a much-needed counterweight to the short-termist and ultimately self-destructive approach that has driven Australia onto the rocks in export markets repeatedly over the last three decades.

There's growing evidence that an increasing number of companies are taking these issues more seriously and giving them priority; the number of acknowledgments on back labels and websites is testament to this movement. But cultural caution or corporate uncertainty still acts as a brake to greater progress, for many the all-important "so what" question still hangs in the air. I'll leave the last word to another winemaker interviewed by Allen, this time Gary Green, a Kamilaroi man and co-owner of Mount Yengo Wines in the Hunter Valley. "Wine can be a vehicle to promote our culture to the world. Conversations start over a bottle of wine. And conversations help with reconciliation." ♦