Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, on 13 February 2008, gave an unqualified apology in Parliament to indigenous people, especially for the mistreatment of the stolen generations. He acknowledged the past, he said. In order to help all Australians (First Australians, First Freedomers, and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago) move forward, in the spirit of reconciliation and a fair go for all. The Prime Minister preempted the need for serious action to close the gap in health, education and employment, and called for bipartisan attention to constitutional recognition of the first Australians.

It is significant in global perspective that the apology of five years ago is part of the trend and politics of recognition that also includes education, restoration and revitalizing cultural identity. This is what this volume addresses, with case studies from around the world.

The first chapter I turned to was Monash University’s Rain Abroad’s discussion of how adjusting histories in Australia has been a primary step in reconciliation. This is part of the context of ‘sorry day’. Abroad discusses the use of history and memory in understanding native title and the stolen generations. He critiques the assumption that ‘shared history’ necessarily precedes reconciliation, and argues for ‘sharing histories’ and recognizing the values and weaknesses of academic history, as well as oral forms of aboriginal histories and memory.

The main value of the book, whether for Australian or other contexts grappling with issues of historical justice, is its in-depth analysis of case studies internationally.

The first cases concern reparations and restitution. Writers discuss compensation for descendants of African-American slaves in America in the name of total justice (they were promised and then denied “forty acres and a mule”) after the Civil War, West German restitution of victims of Nazis (which is often cited as a model), and Greenlanders relocated for the American military.

Another three cases relate to memory and recognition. Russia had to work out its treatment of foreign prisoners. There was political and judicial contention in prosecuting those responsible for the Khmer Rouge’s mass murders in Cambodia. And President Chirac’s 1995 apology for Vichy’s anti-Semitism has prompted other French organisations to recognize their complicity. Notably the church apologised for its silence, admitting: “eclesiastical interests interpreted in an excessively restrictive manner came before the commandments of the conscience and we must ask ourselves why” (145). The chapter suggests France needs to apologise also for Algeria and use of torture. The other contemporary lesson relevant for Australia is the church’s need to apologise and act on historical justice for victims of clergy abuse.

The third set of cases examine reconciliation. Of interesting contrast to Australia, New Zealand/Aotearoa has demonstrated efficient negotiation of reparations and development of official biculturalism, although the Maori quest for autonomy remains unsettled. And the most famous case of restorative justice is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of post-apartheid South Africa.

There is also discussion of the compensation paid to interned Japanese-Americans, Korean women used as Japanese Army sexual slaves, Germany’s use of slave labour and incarceration of homosexuals, and Easy Germany’s Stasi files and shooting of escaping citizens.

These are not the only cases of historical justice. I would have been interested in reading more about Canada and South America, but this is comprehensible for one volume. By the end of the book, it covers nine countries and five continents in some depth, and shows some of the diversity of challenges and progress in addressing past wrongs.

Historical justice brings wide legal, moral, historical, theological and financial dilemmas. There are questions of how a group gets justice, whether compensation is individual or collective, how groups compete, who is ignored, international justice standards, when trials or commissions are needed, the fairness of proper restitution, and how to manage the resentment of a country’s majority and other minority groups.

It is significant that discussions about justice and ‘repairation politics’ can focus more on righting the wrongs of history than on lifting a vision for the future, as John Torpay points out in the section on the politics of restoration. ‘Entrepreneurs of memory’, and politicians following Kevin Rudd, will need to consider much more to focus on the past, and how much to pragmatically deal with policy implications for the future and not extract attention from needed social reform.

The writers and their contributions reflect the growing field of activism and research in historical justice. The volume is co-edited by Manfred Berg, a historian specializing in the African-American civil rights movement and teaching at University of Heidelberg, and Bernd Schaefer, a senior scholar with the Cold War International History Project. Both were research fellows at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., when it hosted a conference in March 2003, some of the papers of which form this volume. The result is a useful reference book for all who are reflecting and acting on historical justice.

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