

# Remarks at the launch of *The Aunt's Mirrors*

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Ladies and Gentleman:

You have come to the launch of a book about my mother's family. You would be forgiven for thinking that my mother's maiden name is Shvartsslang (which is, of course, Yiddish for 'Blackadder'). For this book rather gives the impression that our family are the Jewish Blackadders of Australian history. Like Rowan Atkinson's character, Blackadder, we managed to get our hands on George V's cigar case, and the only coin minted in the reign of Edward VIII, and we made the coathangers for Her Majesty the Queen's first visit to Government House. Some of you will not be surprised to learn that the current author revels in preserving such vital details about his family's history. But it might surprise you to discover that we have not always been monarchists. At the time of the English Civil War, we were Roundheads rather than Royalists: my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was the chief supplier of grain to the Parliamentary forces. It is consoling to think that we have always been on the winning side in the major constitutional disputes of the day.

At the core of my book is my late great-aunt, Ruth Goldman, known in the family as Ar-ru. I cannot forget how she revelled, even in times of travail, in recounting her family history. This book is my tribute to the way in which her family's sense of purpose gave meaning to her life. Writing in his *History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson observes, "No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny." This sense of history and purpose is at the core of the values of the people in this book. Their shared form of life gave meaning to Ar-ru's life. And I am grateful to have been witness to that.

If it is the story of a great-aunt, it is also the story of an aunt. Ar-ru shared her love of family history with my aunt, Louise Sheridan, who worked with her, and is here today. It was when housesitting for my aunt that I had the idea to write this book, which is as much about my aunt's house as it is about my great-aunt's researches. In the novel, *Howard's End*, E. M. Forster's depiction of the house allows us to feel the emotional impact that the author's childhood home, Rooksnest, had on him. Indeed, his first proper piece of writing was a memoir of the house, Rooksnest, and the mystical quality that the house's ordinariness held for him. And so it is that I too have vivid memories of ordinariness, of the houses I knew in my childhood, and the emotional impact that such ordinary houses had on me. My aunt has owned two houses during my lifetime, and these have affected me in different ways. This

book gives expression to the feeling of her current house, and, of course, its extraordinary mirrors.

My late grandfather once announced, “There are two things that you can be sure of with Damien: first, whatever he does, he’ll do it well; secondly, there’ll be no money in it.” That was, perhaps, the most generous tribute that my grandfather ever paid me. He was a man who rarely, if ever, saw the value in doing things that did not make money. So I wear it as a badge of honour that he saw something of worth in what I do, even if there is no money in it. He did not live to read this book, and so I cannot say whether he thought that I did it well. I can assure you that there was no money in it. But evidently there is enough value in it for Brandl & Schlesinger’s publisher, Veronica Sumegi, to offer me a contract. To be published under such an august imprint is a further badge of honour. And I am grateful to Veronica personally for being able to see the good where it might least be expected. She once remarked to me, “You are so accomplished *and yet* you get on with Tony Abbott.” Having come here today, I hope that you might buy a copy of *The Aunt’s Mirrors*, and, having bought it, read it, and, in reading it, perhaps be mystified by just how accomplished the writing of someone who gets on with Tony Abbott can be. But, more than that, I hope that you might gain some insight into the sublime perspective from which the lives of seven generations of an ordinary Australian family form part of something timeless.

Kerry Jones has been a recurring theme in my life, and I am delighted to have her here today, as the CEO of the Constitution Education Fund Australia, and so also my boss in my capacity as Director of the Governor-General’s Prize. Many years ago, she established the Five Pillars of Democracy, which underpin the organisation’s work. One of these pillars is ‘shared values’. So it seems fitting that she should host this evening’s launch, because the book speaks to the non-legal aspect of our constitution: the shared values that make possible not only family life, but any form of communal life.

Earlier this month, at the State Memorial Service for the Lawgiver, Noel Pearson told the great and the good, “Only those who have known discrimination truly know its evil.” My people have known millennia of discrimination. Indeed, the experience of discrimination is so ingrained that, in the Torah, we find the commandment that you shall not oppress a stranger, for you yourselves know how it feels to be strangers, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Mr Pearson’s people have known centuries, if not millennia of dispossession and discrimination. But if we have known the feeling of being strangers in a foreign land, his people have known something worse: they have been made to feel like strangers in their own land. This sad state of affairs might yet be rectified, and, if it is, Mr Pearson will be responsible in no small way for giving his people their rightful place in the life of the Australian nation. He is a man of whom the Guugu Yimidhirr people can rightfully feel proud.

Mr Pearson’s recent *Quarterly Essay, A Rightful Place*, is littered with passing references to the Jewish experience, and these bring to mind his 2010 remarks to the American Bar Association that the Jewish people “are a community who have never forgotten history and they never allow anybody else to forget history... They fight staunchly in defence of the

truth. They fight relentlessly against discrimination. But what they have worked out as a people is that they never make their history a burden for the future...”

I am the first to admit that my family is in no sense the apotheosis of the Jewish contribution to the Australian nation. (Perhaps we are really more Baldricks than Blackadders: after all, to get Noel Pearson to launch one’s memoir requires one to have a cunning plan that only Baldrick could come up with—a plan as cunning as a fox who is professor of cunning at Cambridge—not Oxford.) Cunning or not, I am as humbled as a Baldrick that Mr Pearson should be prepared to launch my family memoir, and I look forward to hearing what he makes of my attempt to work out my people’s place in Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Chairman of Cape York Partnership, Noel Pearson.