



Following the failure of the Voice referendum the filmmakers embark on a road trip around Australia to take the temperature on Truth-telling.

90' feature documentary | producer Stephen Luby | Ruby Entertainment and Flying Carpet Films

AN INVITATION



An ambitious project such as RECKONING requires a team of exceptional people.
The intent of this document is to introduce you to the feature documentary,
the project team and our need for production funding to complete principal photography.
We look forward to partnering with you on this exciting stage of our journey.

Thank you for your consideration.

Stephen Luby (Producer)

RECKONING SYNOPSIS



Following the rejection of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament, *Reckoning* responds to our First Nations' call in the Uluru Statement for Truth-telling – by engaging with Indigenous and non-Indigenous folk grappling with the legacies of colonisation. In utilising the latest historical research, *Reckoning* focusses on First Nations resilience and resistance to colonisation, contemporary efforts to counter its negative impacts and the assertion of Indigenous knowledge.

The filmmakers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, embark on a 'both ways' storytelling road trip around Australia – following the path of colonisation and calling in on truth-telling initiatives along the way. The Voice referendum may have failed but across the country settler and First Nations people are creating change through Truth-telling in a long overdue reckoning with the unfinished business of belonging, identity and nationhood.

Along the way a tapestry of initiatives are explored – we visit memorials to black and white; uncover stories of Indigenous resistance, frontier violence and the secret bone trade; experience creative responses to truth-telling; see land initiatives in action; track descendants undertaking critical family histories; and look at ways of reclaiming culture and exploding the myths of the past.

Beyond and beneath the impression created by the Referendum outcome, the truth is being told. But the truth is only worth the trauma if real change occurs as a result. Will we find such change and models to follow or will Truth-telling turn out to be yet another iteration of First Nations people revisiting trauma accompanied by settler hand-wringing?

DEVELOPMENT TO DATE – *Reckoning* has been developed with financial assistance from VicScreen. Field research and writing was conducted over more than two years and a full Treatment completed. The documentary is production ready.

The impetus for Reckoning comes from the diverse experience of its creative team...

While producing Kate Grenville's The Secret River for TV I felt the vibrations of our history shuddering through me. I experienced a deep compulsion to get this story out to as many Australians as possible. I wanted everyone to feel what I had felt, to be taken out of a debate about 'facts' to a place of deeper understanding. The term was not in use at the time, but I had experienced 'truth-telling' and I wanted more.

Stephen Luby, Producer

My grandmother was removed as a child to the Swan River Native and Half-Caste Mission. Having been involved in truth telling for over 30 years, I see Reckoning as a means to understand the tensions that we all grapple with in the face of our shared histories on this continent, to learn from the complex choices of individuals in the context of their time and reveal the layered influence of the past in the present.

Steve Kinnane, Executive Producer, Co-writer, Collaborating Director

Coming from a British background I find I'm increasingly questioning my position as a settler Australian. A repressive upbringing left me intolerant of the hidden, and a theme of my filmmaking has been secrecy and its legacies - be it 'lost' Aboriginal graves, family skeletons, a secret rocket range, or refugees locked in remote detention centres. Truth-telling has much to do with hidden stories.

Steve Thomas, Co-writer, Director

WHY RECKONING?

The Voice Referendum indicated that many Australians see First Nations people and concerns as peripheral to their everyday lives. But beneath that view lies a deal of uncertainty, confusion and curiosity. 'Why wasn't I told?' is a common reaction from people who begin to learn the truth about our history. In Reckoning the filmmakers set out to re-centre their audience by participating personally in challenging 'the great Australian silence'. Can they succeed?

Three Steves - Kinnane, Thomas and Luby - each with extensive experience in authorship and filmmaking in this area, have decided to collaborate in making a documentary which will investigate the state of black-white relations on the ground across the nation. The history of this country since 1788 is a story of black-white interaction and this will be a both ways storytelling approach. Kinnane is a marda-marda from the Kimberley. Luby is a settler Australian with roots going back several generations. Thomas is a relatively recent English migrant. Together they set out on a six-week journey to engage with local Truth-telling initiatives across the country...

HOW RECKONING?

Reckoning is a response to the Uluru Statement's invitation to Truth-telling, an attempt to explore the experiences of individuals and communities grappling with the impacts of colonisation and their legacy for all Australians. Perhaps beginning with Victoria's Yoorrook Justice Commission, the filmmakers take a route across the continent which follows the spread of colonisation - from the south-east, northwards and westwards. They call in at cities, townships and communities across six states to meet people of all kinds and backgrounds who are tackling the need for Truth-telling in a myriad of ways. Exploiting the popular trope of the road journey they navigate their exploration from the confines of a Toyota Hilux, with the virtual support of mentors such as First Nations 'critical friend' Dr Julia Hurst (the Australian Centre).

Arriving at communities in a thoughtful, prepared and collaborative way, rather than parachuting in to extract stories and knowledge without return, the filmmakers aim to engage in an inclusive dialogue which has room for multiple perspectives. Open to taking risks, who knows who or what surprises they may encounter or what lessons they will learn?



SOME EXAMPLES OF RECKONING STORIES



Yarri and Jacky Sculpture - Gundagai, NSW

During the great flood of 1852 the new township of Gundagai was engulfed by the swollen Murrumbidgee. 69 settlers, nearly half the population, were rescued from drowning over three days and nights by two Wiradjuri men, Yarri and Jacky Jacky, with their bark canoes. The rest drowned - the most flood fatalities in Australia since colonisation. Now, descendants from both sides have come together to commemorate this act of bravery and resilience with a life-size bronze sculpture, breathing new hope into the local Wiradjuri community.



A Tale of Two Memorials - Fremantle & La Grange Bay, WA

On the Fremantle Esplanade is a large marble memorial to three white explorers (quote) 'murdered by treacherous Aborigines at La Grange Bay' in 1864. Some years ago the Karrijarri community persuaded the Fremantle Council to add a plaque to the memorial giving their side of the story. They have recently erected their own memorial at Bidyadanga (La Grange) to the women and children massacred in retaliation for the deaths of the white men - who had ignored protocols, fouled waterholes and threatened violence. Traditional owner and elder Joe Edgar is a descendant of the only survivor of the massacre - his great grandmother, a child at the time.



The Durack Dynasty - Lake Argyle, Kimberley WA

The Irish Duracks made the longest cattle drive in history from southern Queensland to open up the Kimberley to pastoralism in the 1880s and staked claims totalling 3 million acres in the process. Their story was made famous by Dame Mary Durack's novel Kings in Grass Castles. During a recent Durack clan reunion at the site of the original homestead on Lake Argyle, a new family tree was published which acknowledges Indigenous descendants. Thus new possibilities for reconciliation are opened up.



The Battle of Meewah (One Tree Hill) - Toowoomba, Qld

On 12 September 1843 the warrior Multuggerah and his men successfully ambushed a convoy of bullock drays accompanied by heavily armed settlers by barricading the road with logs. The squatters fled and the bullocks were driven off. Later a revenge party was lured up the slopes of One Tree Hill and again defeated when Multuggerah's warriors pelted them with rocks and boulders. Today, this famous victory is publicly commemorated every year in a ceremony overlooking Meewah and acknowledging First People's resistance to colonisation.



Derrawa Dhaura (Yellow Ground) - Yass Valley, NSW

When Sam Vincent took over the running of the family farm from his parents, his friend Dave Johnston, a First Nations archaeologist, identified a large ochre quarry on the property, rich with artefacts and used over thousands of years. Now declared an Aboriginal Heritage Site, Sam is happy that local clans can use the quarry again and keen to tell neighbouring farmers that there's no danger of losing their land.



Dear Mattie - Melbourne, Vic & Borroloola, NT

The story of the discovery and publication of the 'Dear Mattie' letter, a unique first hand account in which the son of a family of Melbourne brewers writes to his sister in 1885 describing a massacre in which he participated at Borroloola in the NT. The language used is shocking to the modern ear eg. 'Killing blacks by the odd ones or twos is no good, nothing but a wholesale slaughter will do any good'. The letter is archived as evidence of one of some 400 massacres across the nation on the University of Newcastle's Colonial Massacre Map - lead researcher the late Prof Lyndall Ryan.



The Bone Trade - Bruny Island, Tas

Cassandra Pybus is a descendant of Richard Pybus who was given large, free land grants on Bruny Island - Truganini's country. Through her interest in the life (and death) of the latter she has extensively researched the illicit 'bone trade', conducted by 'gentlemen of science' and through which human remains were removed to collections all over the world - including from Wybalenna, the 'reserve' on Flinders island to which the survivors of Tasmania's 'Black War' were exiled in the 1830s and where over 150 died. Cassandra's work is an important contribution to the return of remains to First Nations communities.



The Whipping Tree - Warmun, WA

In the remote Indigenous community at Warmun in the Kimberley there's a 'whipping tree', which was used by police to tie Aboriginal people to for beating. There are whippings in living memory and the community has removed the tree but wants to commemorate its significance. Plans are underway to cut through a section of the old tree, add art designs and mount it in place of the whipping tree as a memorial:

This is our place, This is the heart, this bloodwood tree.

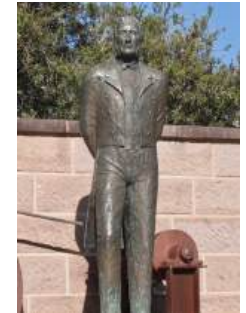
At this place we remember the story of suffering, being chained and 'belted'.

At this place we remember and we forgive. Now we walk on together.



The Pioneer - Wiseman's Ferry, NSW

Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River* is based on her ancestor Solomon Wiseman, whose sandstone mansion is now a pub with a statue dedicated to the convict turned 'Pioneer, Inn-keeper and Ferry-master'. With the records silent on exactly how Wiseman 'took up' land on the Hawkesbury and amid rumours that he pushed his wife down the stairs and killed her, Kate wonders why this man is memorialised rather than those who were displaced from their land? Now in her new book, *Unsettled*, she tries to restore the original inhabitants to the area around Currabubula in northern NSW, where her grandparents farmed.



Resistance on the Broken River

Benalla has long been known as 'the site of the biggest massacre of whites during colonisation' - when 8 Faithfull brothers stockmen were killed by Aborigines in 1838. Now the Benalla Aboriginal History Group, a collaboration between First Nations and white locals, has done its own research and uncovered the story, not of a massacre but of a fight, and of the ensuing retribution visited on local tribes. The city is having to get used to a new narrative - part of a coordinated uprising of tribes from Port Phillip to southern Queensland against the squatting movement, now documented in historian Stephen Gapp's new book, *Uprising*.



Warrigal Creek - East Gippsland, Vic

Libby Balderstone's farm includes the site of the massacre of 60-150 GunaiKurnai people by Angus McMillan's 'Highland Brigade' in 1843 in retribution for the killing of the son of a squatter. The site is close to the family's homestead on a picturesque bend in the creek. Libby feels a huge responsibility to be a good custodian and wants to share both the place and the truth. But there are obstacles. A confidante is traditional owner and GunaiKurni elder Uncle Russell Mullet.



THE FILMMAKING TEAM



Stephen Luby
Producer

began his career as a documentary maker producing social issue TV docos, then moved into comedy, developing and producing TV shows including the original series of Kath and Kim. Subsequent productions included the Murray Whelan telemovies and the comedy/drama series Bed of Roses for ABC TV.

In 2015 Stephen produced the award winning mini-series The Secret River, based on Kate Grenville's book - the ABC's top-rating local drama that year. He returned to documentary producing in 2020 with The Hunt for Discovery Channel.

Stephen has won the Screen Producer's Association of Australia 'Producer of the Year' award three times, most recently in 2016 for The Secret River, which also won the 2016 Logie Award for 'Most Outstanding Mini-Series. He teaches at the VCA Film School, Melbourne University.

Watch The Secret River [HERE](#)



Steve Kinnane
Executive Producer, Co-writer,
Collaborating director

is a Marda Marda from Mirriwoong country in the East Kimberley. He is a writer, researcher and artistic creator as well as lecturer in politics and history with a focus on community resilience, belonging and connections with place.

Kinnane co-wrote and produced The Coolbaroo Club (1996), an ABC TV documentary about the Aboriginal social club that thrived in Perth during the repressive 1960s. It was awarded the HEREOC Human Rights Award for the Arts. His book Shadow Lines (2003) is a deeply personal, mixed-race love story about Aboriginal resilience which won the AIATSIS Stanner Award and WA Premier's Book Award.

Steve is currently Co-Chair Indigenous Research at the Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame.

Watch The Coolbaroo Club [HERE](#)



Steve Thomas
Writer, Director

is an independent documentary maker. His feature Freedom Stories (2015) premiered at the Sydney Film Festival and was a finalist in the Documentary Australia Foundation Awards. It completed a trilogy on the subject of asylum seekers along with Hope (2007) and Welcome to Woomera (2004). Hope won the ATOM Award for Best Social/Political Documentary and was a finalist in the Australian Human Rights Awards.

His earlier films include Black Man's Houses (1992) and Harold (1994), both multi-award winning ABC TV documentaries examining black-white history and relations in Australia.

He won the AFI Award for Best TV Documentary with The Hillmen - A Soccer Fable (1996) and a United Nations Association Media Peace Award for Least Said, Soonest Mended (2004), his twin sister's adoption story.

Watch Freedom Stories [HERE](#)
Watch Black Man's Houses [HERE](#)

RECKONING ADVISORS



Dr Julia Hurst is Deputy Director of the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne and 'critical friend' to Reckoning. Her Indigenous heritage crosses Dharawal and Darug land. Julia is a postdoctoral scholar and lecturer in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. Her publications include *The Mess of Colonialism, the Complexity of Treaty* (2021) and *The Truth Will Set You Free? The promises and pitfalls of truth-telling for Indigenous emancipation* (2023).

Prof Henry Reynolds is a historian and Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities at the University of Tasmania. His pioneering scholarly work, especially *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), was critical in changing understandings of the Australian frontier. His books include *The Law of the Land* (1987), *This Whispering in our Hearts* (1998) and *Why Weren't We Told* (1999), and lately *Truth-telling: History, Sovereignty and the Uluru Statement* (2021).



Dr Helen Thomas is a psychologist and senior lecturer at Victoria University, where she serves as Chair of the Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) program. Helen previously led the Social and Emotional Wellbeing team at the Yoorrook Justice Commission – Victoria's First Nations truth-telling initiative. She has extensive experience as a practicing psychologist, specialising in trauma-informed, culturally safe consultation and support.

Kevin Bell AO KC was appointed as a Commissioner of the Yoorrook Justice Commission in 2021. He is a former Judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria, president of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal and Director of the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law. He is an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Law at Monash University.



In memory of **Prof Lyndall Ryan** - Developer of the University of Newcastle Colonial Massacre Map and an inspiration to this project.



OUR APPROACH



Our approach to documentary making is one that centres the interests of our participants. We will work collaboratively to provide agency for everyone involved and the achievement of mutual aims around truth-telling. Room will be made for the expression of diverse perspectives and key participants will be encouraged to join the project's advisory group for consultation throughout the filmmaking process. Reciprocity will be a key.

Participants will control their own representation and story-telling. This will include rights of consultation, veto and withdrawal throughout production and post-production. The cultural and ethical integrity of the project will be managed with our participants.

Core Tenets of our Approach:

- Advisory panel - made up of Indigenous and non-Indigenous experts plus representatives of participating communities/groups.
- Partnership with participants - sharing of creative control via meaningful and ongoing consultation and collaboration, including during editing.
- Consent configured as an ongoing process, including the right to withdraw and veto over edited footage related to each participant/community through to completion of editing and distribution.
- Principles of reciprocity and compensation for time donated..
- Formal recognition of the Traditional Owners of lands filmed on.
- Attribution - appropriate acknowledgement to be made of individual or community ownership of any authored cultural material used in the film, such as paintings, songs, dances, photography, film, etc.
- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights - consultation, clearance and acknowledgement (including payment where appropriate) of ICIP where use is made of eg. archival material, imagery, Indigenous knowledge, filmed landscapes.
- Shared profit arrangement with participants/communities appearing in the film.

PATHWAY TO AUDIENCE

WHY A FEATURE DOCUMENTARY?

The power of documentary lies in its ability to move audiences through telling personal stories, assisting audiences to put themselves in other people's shoes and inspiring both empathy and action. Reckoning will explore what truth-telling can mean for ordinary people and the kind of change it can invoke, whether attitudinally or practically. Like [Freedom Stories](#), Steve Thomas's previous feature documentary, Reckoning will form a tapestry of unique stories. It will combine different perspectives on truth-telling and offer models for action.

WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

Our audience is the whole of Australia (white and black) and beyond. Documentaries have the potential to reach a wide audience - whether through broadcasts, streaming, community screenings or education. The feature documentary will be the focal point of Reckoning but associated educational materials and an effective impact strategy will be developed alongside it, and the film will be repurposed for different audiences.

An experienced Impact Producer will be employed to drive and oversee the Pathway to Audience strategy. Filmmakers are constantly improving on impact and we acknowledge reference to important precedents such as *In My Blood It Runs*, *Like My Brother*, *My Name is Gulpilil* and *Ten Canoes*.

IMPACT STRATEGY

- [Cinema release](#)

National cinema release via appropriate distributor or contracted agent.

- [Publicity and promotion campaign \(incl social media\)](#)

Publicity Agent and Impact Producer tailor campaign to cinema release.

- [International Festivals](#)

Premiere at MIFF followed by targeted festival release over the following 12 months.

- [TV and/or streaming acquisition](#)

The feature will be submitted to mainstream broadcasters and streaming platforms with possible repurposing as 50' version for TV or 2 x 45' version for streaming.

- [Community screenings](#)

National program of community screenings sponsored and organised by regional and local community orgs dedicated to First Nations development. An envelope containing resource materials to be placed on every seat (ditto cinema release whenever possible).

- [Partnering with national organisations](#)

Discussions are beginning with orgs interested in promoting Reckoning to their client bases eg. Reconciliation Australia, Culture is Life, Australians for Native Title & Reconciliation, Common Ground, Learn Our Truth and the Ebony Institute.

- [ATOM Study Kit](#)

Australian Teachers of Media is the acknowledged producer of Study Guides for schools.

- [Repurposing of material](#)

Digital technology makes it possible to repurpose material for niche audiences. We have experience of this through Freedom Stories (eg. creation of shorts tailored to classroom use).

- [Educational distribution](#)

Ronin Films is the acknowledged leader in distribution to schools and is keen to acquire Reckoning (see expression of interest).

- [Website](#)

A dedicated and interactive website will be designed to service and resource the various uses and applications of Reckoning.

EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS OF SUPPORT

Combining multiple narratives across time, Reckoning steps into diversity and complexity of storytelling. The documentary follows key examples of how Indigenous and Settler lives are inextricably linked, both historically and contemporarily. - **Dr Julia Hurst**

Truth-telling, and what one does with the truth, continues to be an urgent and ongoing task for our nation. These filmmakers are to be congratulated for conceiving a project which will exploit the popularity of the visual medium to show how this process is taking root at a community level in diverse and intriguing ways. - **Prof Henry Reynolds**

We share the goals of the Reckoning filmmakers in their exploration of truth telling, what that means and how positive community change can be achieved. This is a very live issue in our region and we've been impressed with their determination to ensure that the concept for a film is built with First Nations involvement from the ground up. - **Benalla Aboriginal History Group**

The Meewah Committee is dedicated to our shared history and the journey of seeking truth. We do this learning from the wisdom of First People and sharing knowledge with the wider community. These aims align with those of the filmmaking team responsible for the Reckoning documentary and we have embarked on sharing information with one another. - **Amy Cook**

Having met with and discussed the vision behind the team's documentary project, I believe Reckoning offers a timely and powerful platform for amplifying voices that have too often been silenced. This documentary will help share the truth of our shared history, bringing to light stories of injustice, strength, and survival that Australia and the world needs to hear. - **Shannon Bauwen, Gunningurru Aboriginal Corporation**

Reckoning is an important undertaking in the post-referendum context and in the broader context of how Australia is to grapple with its Indigenous history in order better to understand the past, the impact of the past upon the present and how this may help to create a better future. - **Kevin Bell**

The commitment of our Sculpture Project to truth-telling and reconciliation is illustrative of the themes to be explored by the creative team behind the exciting documentary project, Reckoning, with whom we are pleased to have formed a collaborative relationship. - **Gundagai Yarri and Jacky Jacky Sculpture Committee**

WHAT WE SEEK...

As with Steve Thomas's previous feature documentaries, Freedom Stories and Hope, our strategy is to raise funds progressively. If we can raise 60% of the budget then the other 40% would be covered by the ATO's Australian Producer Offset. With a feature film budget of at least \$500k that means raising some \$300k, of which at least two-thirds will be required to shoot the film. That is the funding we are currently seeking in partnership with philanthropy, donations and industry investment.

Reckoning is registered with Documentary Australia (click [HERE](#)) and therefore has charitable DGR status. A full budget breakdown is available on request, along with further details of the shortlisted stories we plan to cover and in some cases sample footage. We can also supply Letters of Support from prospective participants/groups.

You are invited to become a Reckoning partner and work with us towards the realisation of a major contribution to the national debate on Truth-telling. Thank you for your consideration.



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