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Ways of Knowing the Burdekin

When the Bowen Historical Society convened for its first meeting in August 1963, members faced the problem of where to begin; civic pride inspired its formation rather than an immersion in history.¹ During deliberations about a suitable first project:

Someone mentioned 'James Morrill', a very happy suggestion. No one knew very much more than that he had lived for 17 years with the blacks and said on presenting himself to some white stockmen 'Don't shoot—I'm a British object'. What could be more appropriate than to begin with Queensland's first known white resident?²

On 26 January 1964, as part of its Australia Day celebration, the society unveiled an obelisk atop Morrill's grave in the Bowen Cemetery.³ The brass plaque commemorated Morrill as: 'Shipwrecked mariner, who lived 17 years with the aborigines and thus is the first known white resident of North Queensland'. As local dignitaries lined up to speak, and the municipal band played 'Advance Australia Fair', the history of the Bowen Historical Society became part of Morrill's story, and vice versa. The society adopted Morrill; it represented itself as having rescued his story from the wilds of 'obscurity' and honoured him for the first time.⁴

1 The society's first meeting had been called by Victor Jones, long-time chairman of the Bowen Regional Research and Promotion Bureau. *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 21 (August 1979): 14–15.

2 *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 2.

3 The grave was unmarked, but Frederick Raynor, founder of the *Port Denison Times*, had left a record of its location in the cemetery in his papers. *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 2 October 1929, 9.

4 Bowen Historical Society, *The Story of James Morrill*, n.p.; *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964; Jones, 'The Saga of James Morrill'.

The society's first publication, *The Story of James Morrill*, reproduced *Sketch of a Residence* with supplementary material. Even as the society has continued to document many other aspects of local history, Morrill's story has remained important.



Figure 1: Morrill's grave in the Bowen Cemetery, marked by the obelisk erected by the Bowen Historical Society in 1963.

Source: Photograph taken by author.

In the beginning, the only account of Morrill's story that society members possessed was Cilento and Lack's rather lively version. In brass, they re-inscribed the epithet that Cilento and Lack had bestowed on Morrill, and that resonated with the narrative of white possession that had made the story so salient for previous generations, labelling Morrill the 'first white resident'. However, in other respects, the society departed from Cilento

and Lack's characterisation of Morrill. At the Australia Day ceremony, he was not remembered as 'wild, unkempt' and indistinguishable from 'a ferocious aboriginal warrior', but as a man of 'courage and character'.⁵ Although the society had an eye to the value of the region's history for tourism, it placed the emphasis squarely on Morrill's worthiness; speakers at the memorial's dedication marked his courageousness and 'patience in adversity', and his integrity and 'desire to serve' as virtuous examples to their listeners.⁶

Morrill's life as a colonist after 1863 was of acute importance. As founding member of the Bowen Historical Society Dr Peter Delamothe put it, Morrill strove 'for the advancement of his new country once restored to civilisation'. He assisted in the founding of Cardwell, purchased an allotment at the first land sale at Townsville, and worked as a respected member of the Customs and pilot boat service. Another founding member of the society, Victor Jones, observed in 1979 that 'Morrill created history' by delivering the first bonded goods to Townsville.⁷ He had also procreated; he and Eliza Jane Ross, housemaid of the police magistrate at Bowen, produced one son, born soon after Morrill's death. The society undertook genealogical research and gathered Morrill's granddaughters around the obelisk in 1964.⁸ Thus, Morrill was remembered as a patriarch in the most intimate sense, as well as a pioneer.

At the same time, not even a dash of sensationalism was necessary to make Morrill's story 'stranger than fiction', as his obituary had observed.⁹ As historian Geoffrey Bolton put it when he thanked the society for sending him a copy of *The Story of James Morrill*, it was a pleasure to read a 'true adventure story'.¹⁰ The society, reflecting on its achievements from the vantage point of its second year, compared the quotient of romance

5 Delamothe soon 'unearthed' the 1863 testimony at the Queensland Parliamentary Library (see *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964) and other accounts began to flow in too, once the search was begun. Cilento was highly respected within the organisation—he was president of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland at the time. The Bowen Historical Society was delighted to receive Cilento as a visitor. See *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 11. See also Cilento and Lack, *Wild White Men of Queensland*, 25; Bowen Historical Society, *The Story of James Morrill*, n.p.

6 *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964.

7 Delamothe, quoted in *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964; Jones, 'The Saga of James Morrill', 8.

8 *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964.

9 *Port Denison Times*, 1 November 1865, 2.

10 *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 2 (January 1965): 2. Bolton probably used it as the main source for his entry on Morrill in the 1967 edition of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. The story had also been passed on to Olaf Ruhen so that it could be included in his forthcoming book of adventure stories, *South Pacific Adventures*. See *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 4 (February 1966): 2.

and adventure in Morrill's story with that of their second subject, Bowen's founder, Captain Sinclair. It was judged that both surpassed the adventure stories of popular nineteenth-century British children's writers: 'Cooper, Henty or Ballantyne never wrote more exciting stories than these'.¹¹

Adventure stories were less likely than they had once been to prompt serious reflection or self-examination. Even while Morrill was telling his own story, their readership was changing. From *Gulliver's Travels* to *Moby Dick*, castaway and captivity stories and travel fiction had formed challenging and invigorating reading for adults in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the genre was progressively handed over to children. For example, scholar Richard Phillips showed how Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* began life as a controversial marriage of realism and fiction, and included a pointed political statement about the nature of American colonisation. In the nineteenth century, the story of *Crusoe* was naturalised (partly due to its own influence on literature) as a true story with normative power for boys in particular.¹² Victor Jones closed his Heatley Memorial Lecture of 1979, delivered to young listeners, with a marriage of Morrill's virtues with the writings of one of the British Empire's favourite children's authors, stating:

May this narrative of the adventurous life of James Morrill, be an inspiration to each of you students here, to strive for excellence in all you do ... then, to paraphrase Kipling's 'If', you will be a worthy citizen indeed.¹³

Had Morrill meant to return to civilisation and stay? Had his adoption by Birri-gubba people changed him irreversibly? Did he have relationships with Aboriginal people that continued to have a claim on his heart? By the time the Bowen Historical Society took up the story, these questions, which had been of pressing importance to Morrill's contemporaries, had lost their urgency. When the authors of *The Townsville Story* (1952) closed their rendition of Morrill's life with musings on 'whether his soul was claimed by the aborigines for their celestial happy hunting grounds, or whether he went to white man's heaven', the question was rhetorical. This was chiefly a story of the 'unusual'; indeed, it would be best if his ghostly companions were fellow adventurers. Cilento and Lack had closed their story with a similar sentimental flourish, claiming, 'pathetically enough,

11 *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 2 (January 1965): 7; Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*, 72–73.

12 Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*, 3–10, 25–26, 81–83.

13 Jones, 'The Saga of James Morrill', 9.

the last word he uttered was: “corroboree”.¹⁴ It had become possible to tell Morrill’s story without the ambivalence with which his contemporaries had approached the tale, and to tell it without engaging in histories of local violence and responsibility. In 1964, as the Bowen Historical Society embarked on the work of collecting, preserving and disseminating local history and marking places of historical interest, Morrill’s case seemed closed. Gathering together the available resources seemed to yield ‘the full story’.¹⁵

However, there were other directions the society’s history-making might have taken. Inaugural co–Vice President Dr John Lacon, recently arrived from England, questioned the place of Morrill’s story as an ‘ancient’ point of origin. Fellow committee members Delamothe and Jones had compared Morrill’s virtues to those of the ancient Greek heroes who had ‘held the pass at Macedon’; in the memorial obelisk itself local granite pieces were disciplined into a classical form associated with the heritage of civilisation.¹⁶ Lacon observed that ‘although we do not consider the history of the James Morrill period as being modern, we are in one sense mistaken. Men were living in Australia a million years ago’.¹⁷ He had possibly read (or read of) Manning Clark’s acclaimed and controversial *History of Australia* (the first volume was released in 1962) that set an entirely new horizon for Australian history in taking in Aboriginal migrations, Asian interest in the southern continent and Dutch exploration of the seventeenth century. However, within the Bowen Historical Society, there seems to have been little further discussion of the ancient migrations from Asia that Lacon enthusiastically explained.¹⁸ His transnational horizon and interest in the *longue durée* were not shared by other members. Instead, the society took a leading role in the maintenance of a local nationalism. It was at the fore of Australia Day activities each year and brought to Bowen an

14 Rapier and Watson, *The Townsville Story*, 6; Cilento and Lack, *Wild White Men of Queensland*, 27.

15 *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 2; Bowen Historical Society, *The Story of James Morrill*, n.p.

16 *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964. See also Jones, ‘The Saga of James Morrill’, 1. Jones wished to ‘help raise him to his proper niche in Australian History’. Besley, ‘At the Intersection of History and Memory’, 39; Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 156–57.

17 *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 5–6.

18 *Ibid.*, 6. McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, 441–42.

initiative of the Queensland Women's Historical Society: Pioneer Day.¹⁹ The Bowen Historical Society's emphasis on Morrill as a white pioneer was not peculiar; rather, it signalled the contribution of the region to a national history that had increasingly come into focus across the first half of the twentieth century, in which Australia was worthy of historical attention as part of the 'world-wide community of the British race'.²⁰

The *Bowen Independent* subtitled its coverage of the 1964 Australia Day ceremony 'Full Recognition After 101 Years' (its proprietor was a founding member of the Bowen Historical Society).²¹ This slightly tardy centenary embodied a commemorative gymnastics. The time frame of 101 years was the interval since Morrill's 'return to civilisation'. If his time with the Birri-gubba was counted, he had arrived in North Queensland 118 years earlier. By 1863, of course, Captain Sinclair had discovered Port Denison, and Bowen was coming into its third year; white settlement in North Queensland had begun before Morrill's rebirth into civilisation. If we are to understand Morrill as the first white resident of North Queensland, his residency must predate white settlement, leapfrogging over Sinclair and the first colonists of Bowen. Yet, Sinclair's shoulders were indispensable; Morrill could only become 'first white resident' by virtue of subsequent settlement. Likewise, he was perhaps only a fitting first subject for the society on the proviso that it would go on to chart the region's 'graph of progress', as the Royal Australian Historical Society urged local historians to do. The society next moved on to a more usual beginning, namely, the 'discovery' of Port Denison by Captain Sinclair.²²

The society recognised Morrill as a peacemaker, 'working unceasingly to bring about better relations between the settlers and the aboriginals', and expressed regret that Morrill's work as a diplomat had not been attended with great success. However, their history-making did not go any further into the conflict that had ensued.²³ As the belated centenary invoked by the *Bowen Independent* suggests, in one sense, Morrill's 'return to civilisation' was the point at which his 'residency' was understood by the society to

19 On the same page as Lacon, Vic Jones argued for the Bowen Historical Society's role in taking responsibility for all of Queensland north of Rockhampton, as Bowen had been the base for 'most of the early explorers and pioneers who did so much to discover and settle' the region. *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 5. A perusal of the *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* from this first issue into the 1990s shows these events at the fore of the organisation's yearly calendar.

20 Curthoys, 'Cultural History and the Nation', 24–25.

21 *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964; *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 1, 11.

22 Geeves, *Local History in Australia*, 4, 14–17. *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 1 (August 1964): 2.

23 Bowen Historical Society, *The Story of James Morrill*, n.p.; *Bowen Independent*, 31 January 1964.

have begun. In this way, his years as an adopted Birri-gubba man were part of the *prehistory* of the region, and the society's own history-making (as well as their understanding of Morrill's story) simply did not go back that far.

Of course, there was no guarantee that readers of the society's *The Story of James Morrill* would understand the story as its authors intended. When Noel Loos wrote his masters qualifying thesis at James Cook University in nearby Townsville in 1970, Morrill's story, made available to him by the society's inaugural booklet, provided a valuable window into Birri-gubba life and frontier conflict in the region. His thesis was one of the first forays into a new history that revisited the primary sources to document the dispossession of Aboriginal people.²⁴ Teaching at the university in the following decades, Loos 'read Morrill's words to students many times ... to describe the shattering impact of colonisation'.²⁵ Through his friendship with Eddie Koiki Mabo, their mutual interest in Indigenous education and teacher training, and joint leadership of the Townsville Treaty Committee, Loos developed a deep respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, culture and history, as well as an appreciation of just how difficult it was to foster such respect in others.²⁶ In 2004, in an article printed in the *Townsville Bulletin*, Loos called attention to the 'treaty' that Birri-gubba people had sought to make through Morrill, acknowledging that the white presence would be ongoing and asking for 'the swamps along the coast north of the Burdekin, the rivers to fish in, and any other land whites did not want'. While the colonists were not prepared to consider this offer of coexistence at the time, in the twenty-first century, Loos hoped that it might be possible for Morrill's descendants via his marriage with Eliza Ross and his Aboriginal descendants to 'look back with pride at their ancestor who tried to intervene in this 19th century holocaust to prevent more bloodshed'.²⁷

The Bowen Historical Society had already produced a new edition of Morrill's story for the twenty-first century. Published in 2002, *James Morrill: His Life and Adventures* began with an account of the events of the Australia Day celebration in 1964, complete with photographs

24 Loos, 'Frontier Conflict in the Bowen District'; Loos, 'The History of North Queensland in Black and White'.

25 Noel Loos, 'The Spirit of Renconciliation [sic]', *Townsville Bulletin*, 31 July 2004, 27.

26 Noel Loos, in conversation with the author, 2 December 2010; Loos, 'Koiki Mabo: Mastering Two Cultures', 1–20.

27 Loos, 'The Spirit of Renconciliation [sic]', *Townsville Bulletin*, 31 July 2004, 27.

of the monument and ceremony. Morrill was re-commemorated as the ‘first white resident’, and the story of his rescue from obscurity by the society’s founding generation was retold, largely as it had been 40 years earlier. In one sense, the new edition was unremarkable; the society’s previous edition had been printed four decades earlier, which meant that there were probably no copies left for distribution—this was simply a matter of putting the story back into circulation.²⁸ Yet, at the turn of the new century, the story appeared in a new light, among different historiographical possibilities.²⁹

As a historian who began to study Australian history in the reconciliation era, I came to this booklet sharing Loos’s aspirations for Morrill’s story: that it might become a story through which the descendants of Aboriginal and settler North Queenslanders might explore their connections and look into the past, possibly standing side by side. As I collected retellings of Morrill’s story, I found myself listening out for fresh new versions that directly confronted the conflicts in the region documented by Loos and other historians across the previous decades. I was also working in the shadow of the ‘history wars’, which had been in full swing when the Bowen Historical Society produced their new edition. As Anna Clark has shown, these debates created a polarising space for the discussion of Australian history, a space in which if you were not wearing a ‘black armband’ then you must be sporting a ‘white blindfold’ instead.³⁰

An earlier episode in the life of Morrill’s story shows how it could spark outrage in historians and others who wished to shape public opinion at a time when history-making was becoming more and more political. Morrill’s plea to the two stockmen as he perched on the fence railing formed the ‘seed’ of David Malouf’s 1993 novel *Remembering Babylon* (though he made the disclaimer that ‘otherwise this novel has no origin in fact’).³¹ It was received with ambivalence. Discussion centred on the ethics of fiction and its power to occasion worthwhile self-examination. Malouf’s story was childlike; when his scrawny and rather idiotic character Gemmy stammered ‘don’t shoot—I’m a B-b-british object’ it was to a child toting

28 Bowen Historical Society, *James Morrill: His Life and Adventures*. The text of the original story follows Gregory’s third edition of 1896. The society’s newsletter simply thanked the two members who gave their time for the ‘preparation of the booklet’ and hoped that ‘we will be able to reprint several other booklets now out of print’. See *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 44 (November 2002): 1, 2.

29 Bradford, ‘A Timeless Now’: Memory and Repetition’, 190, 204–06.

30 Clark, ‘The History Wars’, 152, 157.

31 Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*, 202.

a stick, a make-believe rifle. Gemmy told his story with the assistance of the local minister in front of children at the local school.³² The novel's focus is on the settlers who re-adopt Gemmy, and find him so disturbing because of his sullied whiteness and his relationship with the wild country in which they have taken up land. Malouf chose not to engage explicitly with the violence of the historical frontier or with Aboriginal people and their histories. Germaine Greer condemned the novel for its 'lack of commitment to historical truth' and 'monolithic insensitivity'. Yet, others found the novel a penetrating study of settler shame, fear and the unremitting need to demarcate a clear boundary between whiteness and the unknown. Even so, as Victoria Burrows asked, was Malouf's depoliticised, nostalgic *fiction* defensible in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous Peoples?³³ The venom provoked by Malouf's juxtaposition of childish innocence with Morrill's historical story points to how highly attuned the minds of historians, including myself, and other intellectuals have become to the lack of innocence in Australian history. In one sense (though not necessarily deliberately), Malouf was holding a mirror up to the life of Morrill's 'true' story and history-makers' and readers' expectations of it in the late twentieth century, showing that it continued to be an important part of local and regional settler history, as well as a touchpoint for revisionist histories of the frontier.³⁴

Some of the questions invoked by Malouf's work could be asked of the Bowen Historical Society's act of republication. In terms of what it did *not* seek to do—that is, reassess Morrill's story for the twenty-first century or include intersecting Aboriginal histories—the society's 2002 booklet might be seen as inadvertently continuing the dogged avoidance of recognition that Ross Gibson has described as characteristic in the region: 'this is how the colony was maintained: by sensing but trying not to see, by fearing and knowing but trying not to acknowledge'.³⁵ Yet, this

32 Ibid., 1–3, 8, 16–21.

33 Germaine Greer, 'Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash', *The Age*, 3 November 1993, Features, 11; Kinnane, 'Remembering Babylon', 7–12; Stockdale, 'I Dreamed of Snow Today', 1–10; Burrows, 'The Ghostly Haunting', 124–32.

34 As Jackie Hogan observed of Baz Luhrman's *Australia*, which met with similar criticism in some respects, the novel itself is perhaps an exercise in 'wish fulfilment' at the same time as it creates opportunities to view these wishes with a sense of irony. The theatrics of a slightly absurd representation of history invite the audience to respond in a variety of ways, including with outrage. See Hogan, 'Gendered and Racialised', 64, 71, 75.

35 Gibson, *Seven Versions*, 90–94.

answer does not help to explain what the volume *does* do, and what other responsibilities the society's members might have considered central to their task.

There were, perhaps, several reasons for the Bowen Historical Society to retell Morrill's story as told by its founders. For example, one that emerges in the society's *Bulletin* is respect for those who established the organisation, and a *sense* of solidarity with previous members. The deaths of long-time members were felt keenly, for 'whilst not blood relatives, we are still all one family here at the museum'.³⁶ Further, there was a sense of deliberateness and care involved in retelling the story as it was told in 1964, as it had been inherited from storytellers of previous generations. A new story about Morrill would have required renegotiation of the place of Aboriginal history within the organisation, as well as an active 'forgetting' of previous histories.³⁷ The shaping of history by institutional continuity and loyalty seems strange to the revisionist impulses that characterise much academic history-making; however, these influences cannot be overlooked. Certainly, for the Bowen Historical Society, for which Morrill's story is an important part of the history of the society itself, it would seem to have been important.

Part of the founding members' project was the ordering of history into a timeline of inaugural events that established the comprehensibility of local history as a 'linear pattern ... of development and progress'. However, it should not be assumed that this ordering of history is no longer necessary for later generations; rather, these timelines need to be maintained and expanded in a continual cycle. This is an important part of what Graeme Davison called a 'preservative' impulse, a feature of much local history making.³⁸ As Elizabeth Furniss has observed of Mt Isa, and Heather Goodall of the 'black soil plains' of the New South Wales – Queensland border, efforts to 'establish the long tenure' of the white community in rural and regional local contexts in the present can be understood as a response to social and economic pressures that threaten the life patterns

36 Addressing the 40th anniversary Annual General Meeting, the president exclaimed: 'If only we could have Vic Jones, Henry Darwen and Walter Cottrell with us tonight to see that forty years on, the Museum continues to run like clockwork in the hands of volunteers'. *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 45 (October 2003): 4, 7; *Bowen Historical Society Bulletin* 43 (November 2001): 3.

37 Bradford, "A Timeless Now": Memory and Repetition', 205. As Humphrey McQueen has observed, it can be difficult to write new stories from within old organisations amid a comfortable 'tolerance' for the inherited ways in which Aboriginal history has been negotiated. McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov*, 107–18.

38 Furniss, 'Timeline History', 284–86; Davison, *The Use and Abuse*, 13.

and livelihoods of those communities. Part of this pressure comes from the increased visibility of Aboriginal history-making and local native title processes. In this sense, timelines of pioneer histories help to mark out a present and a future in which ‘colonial authority is established, unproblematic and unchallenged’.³⁹

Economic change and changing landscapes in the ever more highly capitalised rural and mining industries can also contribute to a sense of incipency that can make the re-inscription of historical order socially necessary.⁴⁰ For much of its existence, Bowen has been the ‘Cinderella of the eastern coast’, waiting to be ‘roused to her great importance’ as a port. Whereas a local history cum promotional booklet of 1920 predicted that ‘in the inside of ten years the population of this place should count up to well over 50,000’, the actual population of the Bowen Shire in 2002 was a little over 12,000, and was just beginning to rise again after steady population losses each year from the mid-1990s. In 2012, the Whitsunday Regional Council anticipated that ‘the Bowen and Collinsville communities are well positioned to become an economic powerhouse of the North Queensland region’, a development that would ensure the region’s growth and result in a radical change in the life patterns of its residents.⁴¹ In this context, repeating founding moments, particularly those that signify Bowen’s precedence in the region, may be understood as a securing of the past in the face of an uncertain future. As Furniss observed, though, even history that is ‘conservative in language’ can be ‘creative in application’, and the meaning of local historical practice can only really be understood in the ‘social contexts of their creation, use and reception’.⁴² With this in mind, I travelled north in December 2010.

Bill Murray, engineer, former mayor of Ayr and keen local historian, pointed out to me the different homes he and his wife had lived in along Kilrie Road, running along the southern side of Ayr, about half way between Townsville and Bowen. Some of the other houses belonged to his children, or were their past or future homes; almost every block had a

39 Goodall, ‘Telling Country’, 168; Furniss, ‘Timeline History’, 288.

40 Goodall, ‘Telling Country’, 177–79.

41 Doherty, *The Bowen Book*, 11–47. See also Whitsunday Regional Council, Development, accessed 23 March 2012, www.whitsunday.qld.gov.au/. Many of those leaving Bowen probably did so for nearby mining centres, or for other regional centres like Townsville and Rockhampton with more extensive employment prospects. ‘Bowen Shire LGA profile’, December 2007, prepared by AEC group for the Mackay-Isaac-Whitsunday Regional Economic Development Corporation, accessed 18 July 2018, pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/80338/20080111-0033/www.bowen.qld.gov.au/industry/Bowen%20Profile%20-%20Industry%20Page.pdf.

42 Furniss, ‘Timeline History’, 292–94.

connection. We were on the way to see a marker commemorating Morrill's return to civilisation, a large, attractive stone sitting in the grounds of Airville State School. It was organised by the Burdekin Historical Society and unveiled (from beneath an Australian flag) in July 1981 by Percy Jack, great-great-grandson of Morrill via his marriage with Eliza Ross.⁴³ The plaque reads:

This monument commemorates the saga of shipwrecked mariner James Morrill ... Last survivor of the brig 'Peruvian' ... Reunited with Shepherds Hatch and Wilson on Sheepstation Creek near here January 1863. After living 17 years with Aborigines.

The memorial's use of the word 'saga' to characterise Morrill's story was possibly borrowed from the title of the lecture Victor Jones had delivered in Townsville two years earlier, which members of the Jack family had attended.⁴⁴ A 'saga', in the strictest sense, is a Norwegian or Icelandic story of heroic achievement or marvellous adventure that embodies the traditional history of a family across several generations.⁴⁵ Although, in common English parlance, its meaning has changed to signify a long and complicated series of events, its more precise definition may have reflected the Burdekin Historical Society's broader intention to engage Morrill's white family in this local story, as well as the Jack family's pride in claiming the story as the beginning of their history in the region. The Jack family also funded a memorial to Morrill at the head of the 'avenue of pioneers' at Home Hill, on the south bank of the Burdekin River, as part of the Burdekin Shire Council's celebrations of National Family Day.⁴⁶

About a year before my meeting with Bill Murray, I came across an article in Brisbane's *Courier Mail* celebrating the centenary of Federation—the dignified 'path that led to nationhood ... a journey punctuated by debate and deliberation, not the bullets and bloodshed typical of other great democracies'. The story of Morrill and his descendants was told to illustrate this narrative of peaceful progress. When Morrill and his party of 'starving and exhausted survivors' washed up in North Queensland:

43 *Ayr Advocate*, 24 July 1981.

44 Jones, 'The Saga of James Morrill'. Jones also spoke at the unveiling of the monument, *Ayr Advocate*, 24 July 1981.

45 'Saga', *Oxford English Dictionary*.

46 'Pioneer Avenue, Eighth Avenue, Home Hill, Queensland', and Ian Frazer, 'Home Hill Hero: Descendants Honour Shipwrecked Sailor', undated and unsourced newspaper clippings, Phillip Murray, Private Collection, Townsville.

None expected their descendants would live in the same area. They certainly would not have visualised the thousands of hectares of sugar cane farms that now exist inland of Cape Cleveland, and pictured their great-grandsons working one of those farms more than 150 years later. But that is just what has happened and Morrill's cane-farming great-grandsons could not be prouder of their ancestor's role in the history of the north.⁴⁷

Imperialism, settlement and farming in North Queensland is a matter of family and inheritance, founded in suffering and achieved by the ancient and universal process of human increase across generations.⁴⁸ This Genesis-like narrative has something in common with Bill's story of Kilrie Road. When he made Kilrie Road his home in the 1960s, there were a number of Aboriginal camps on the other side of the creek. Some of the Aboriginal people who lived there had helped on his and his neighbours' properties. Now, in Bill's mind, Kilrie Road belongs to his family. 'It's not PC' he told me, 'but I call myself a white Murri'.⁴⁹ Bill wanted me to meet one of Morrill's descendants, a member of the Jack family, and a few days later we drove over to Brandon together; unfortunately, no one was home. Bill encouraged me to contact the family when I returned to Sydney; he wanted me to see Morrill's journal, to which his descendants had added a family chronicle. On the northern side of Plantation Creek, opposite Bill's place, near where the Aboriginal camps had been, is the Gudjuda Centre. When I told Bill I was going to visit the centre on that first afternoon, he warned me not to expect to learn a great deal from the people there. Yet, he was extremely proud of a local history book that he had helped bring into being during his time as mayor: John Kerr's *Black Snow and Liquid Gold*. Bill called me back to his home a few days later to supply me with further copies of its pages, in which Kerr described the small settlement of Aboriginal people and islanders along Plantation Creek, with huts 'scattered ... amidst banana trees, pawpaws and sweet potato patches', leasing the land from adjacent farmers. Kerr noted, with a sense of justice, that Birri-gubba ancestral remains were repatriated at Plantation Creek Park in 1987, signifying the official recognition of Aboriginal history at this place.⁵⁰

47 Chris Jones, 'Survivor Braved All ... with a Little Help from His Friends', *The Courier Mail*, 1 August 2001, published as part of a special Centenary of Federation supplement titled 'Birth of Our Nation'.

48 Curthoys, 'Mythologies', 14–17; Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile'.

49 Bill Murray, in conversation with the author, 1 December 2010.

50 The book's title refers to the ash from cane burning and the region's underground water supplies. Kerr, *Black Snow*, 187.

Eddie Smallwood, chairman of the Gudjuda Corporation, was working the day I passed through Ayr. However, he took time out to meet me in the shady park next to the Gudjuda Centre, where a large sculpture of a python presided over a Dreaming story and the repatriated remains of a number of Birri-gubba ancestors. The next few days were not going to be good for learning about Birri-gubba history and culture, Eddie told me. There was some sorry business taking place at Palm Island, and an important funeral in Bowen. Eddie encouraged me to return in the new year, when I might be able to see the bush foods garden beside the centre (flooded at that time), visit the turtle-tagging project that is part of their cultural and natural resources management program, and talk with some of the Elders. He offered to take me up Mt Elliot and show me the rock carvings there—not because they hold any specific information about Morrill's story, but because they had been part of his country. Eddie told me that Morrill fathered a number of children with a Birri-gubba woman or women; that many of their descendants, and other members of the Birri-gubba community, were forcibly relocated away from the area in the 1920s and later on; and that some of them were still living in the area. There is an old story about a young Aboriginal girl with light skin who wandered onto Inkerman Station and was taken in by the Ross family. Yellow Gin Creek, flowing into the sea near Wunjunga, is named after her, and it is thought that she might also have been Morrill's daughter.⁵¹

When I asked Eddie whether Morrill's story is now a story about shared history, he responded that its importance for the Birri-gubba community is in its attestation that Aboriginal people were in this area before colonisation, with their own language and customs. Eddie was advocating the identification of the traditional owners of the region with the language group, Birri-gubba, rather than the 'nations' or clan groups under this umbrella (i.e., Birri-gubba, Juru, Wulgurukaba and Gia) that are delineated by contested boundaries and cause argument and division in the present.⁵² The very basic ethnography and geography and lack of personal names in Morrill's *Sketch of a Residence* are, from this perspective, something of a blessing—the story attests to the Birri-gubba presence generally, without fuelling debate about who belongs to and speaks for which country, or who is descended from whom.

51 Eddie Smallwood, in conversation with the author, 1 December 2010.

52 Ibid.

Morrill's story holds a similar place in the Townsville Cultural Centre, which opened in 2005, and was founded with a board of eight directors: four from the Wulgurukabba and Bindal communities (both of the Birri-gubba language group), two from Torres Strait Islander communities and the remaining two from any other Aboriginal traditional custodian group.⁵³ The centre presents a many-layered account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life in North Queensland in its interpretive gallery. The visitor encounters Morrill just inside the entry to the circular gallery space. An account of Morrill's rescue by a group of Aboriginal men investigating the cause of persistent shooting stars over the place where he and his companions struggled for their lives is followed by a brief summary of his adoption; the role of Morrill's published narrative in attesting to the distinctive life ways and languages of Aboriginal people in the region is also outlined.⁵⁴ In the process of this telling, Morrill's Birri-gubba knowledge had been converted into ethnography, a way of thinking in which many Aboriginal people have become highly literate. Today, as Birri-gubba communities work on native title histories, local heritage matters and public history-making, Morrill's story is a valuable reference point. Unlike the historians and anthropologists who made the first attempts to recover Aboriginal life in North Queensland in the 1970s and 1980s, and who found Morrill's story wanting, Eddie Smallwood and others do not expect Morrill to provide a 'complete' account. Instead, working backwards from contemporary traditions and links with the land, they are grateful for what Morrill did say. In a sense, after being used against Birri-gubba people for a century, Morrill's knowledge is now being repatriated.

The use of Morrill's story as an assertion of Aboriginal history is nowhere more tangible than in the mural located in the Bowen State Primary School. Bowen is a town of murals; 24 of them decorate the compact town grid, painted on the walls of public buildings between 1988 and 2001. The first eight depicted the growth of agriculture and industry in the region: white men and their machines. In 1991, as a corrective of sorts, a mural depicting pioneer women was added, sponsored, like its predecessors, by the Bowen Murals Society. The triptych on the tennis court wall at the school was not funded by the Murals Society; instead,

53 The website of the Cultural Centre, Townsville, staff and board of directors, accessed 18 July 2018, www.cctownsville.com.au/about-us/ (page discontinued).

54 Interpretive Gallery, the Cultural Centre, 2–68 Flinders Street East, Townsville, North Queensland, opened September 2005. I visited in December 2010.

it was funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, possibly via the Girudala Community Co-operative, and was painted by a local Aboriginal artist, Robert Paul.⁵⁵ Paul familiarised himself with Morrill's story by reading *Sketch of a Residence*. He painted Morrill and other survivors leaving the stricken *Peruvian* on their raft; Morrill and his Aboriginal rescuers overcoming their initial mutual fear with peaceful gestures; and a central cameo based on the studio portraits of Morrill after he 'connected up back' with his own people, as Paul put it.⁵⁶

Paul went on to paint a second mural the following year, which is known in the official guide as the 'Aboriginal and Islander History' mural. It depicts Elders passing on a Dreaming story to younger listeners 'while other members of the tribe depict a good hunting season in their paintings', as well as 'Islanders working on one of the many Chinese farms in the Bell's Gully area' in the early twentieth century.⁵⁷ For some locals, Paul's Morrill mural registers strongly in their thinking about the meaning of Morrill's story. Henry Young, a member of the Murals Committee, identified Paul's two Bowen murals, and a third mural about blackbirding and the use of South Sea Islander labour in the region, as the only ones that acknowledged the contribution of 'dark people' to Bowen's history; he also saw the Historical Society's 1964 obelisk as a belated nod to Aboriginal history. Endorsing the visibility of Aboriginal history, Young declared that Paul did a 'damn fine job'.⁵⁸

55 The official murals guide, while it notes that this artwork was funded by 'ATSIC' (fewer readers will know what this acronym signifies as time passes), does not identify Paul as an Aboriginal artist, or include any references to his interpretation of the story.

56 Robert Paul, in conversation with the author, 19 November 2010.

57 The Whitsunday Regional Council, 'Bowen Murals', accessed 18 July 2018, pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/80338/20080111-0033/www.bowen.qld.gov.au/tourism/MuralNineteen.html. This publication was widely available as a hardcopy booklet.

58 Henry Young, in conversation with the author, 23 November 2010.



Figure 2: Mural representing the story of James Morrill in the grounds of Bowen State Primary School, painted by Robert Paul in 1992, and restored by the artist in 2012.

Source: Photograph supplied by Robert Paul and included with his permission.

Paul's mural subtly reminds viewers that Morrill's story is part of local Aboriginal history as well as local pioneer history. Paul based his narrative on the same version of Morrill's story that white local historians use, and he employed a similar kind of visual language to the other Bowen murals. His understanding of the story is that it shows 'two cultures of the land' coming together through Morrill's adoption by Birri-gubba people.⁵⁹

Bill Murray warned me not to fall prey to the Bowen Historical Society's claims (or anyone else's for that matter) to know everything about Morrill. My meeting with Phillip Murray, psychologist and amateur archaeologist (and no relation of Bill's) in Townsville a few days later helped me to make sense of Bill's territorialism. Phillip and Bill are both intensely interested in the burial place of Morrill's fellow castaways, Captain and Mrs Pitkethly.⁶⁰ The Bowen Historical Society's *The Story of James Morrill* (1964) concluded with a call to mark their grave and, in 1979, members of the society were contacted by an archaeologist who had found skeletal remains, perhaps belonging to Alice Pitkethly. The remains might have been relocated to the new museum building had they not been so

⁵⁹ Robert Paul, in conversation with the author, 19 November 2010 and 15 December 2017.

⁶⁰ Morrill stated that he had asked the group caring for the stricken Captain to bury rather than cremate him. Morrill, *Sketch of a Residence*, 12–13. By the time he had heard of the Captain's death and returned, Mrs Pitkethly had also died. Eugene Fitzalan's poem provided some further clues as to the location of the grave.

fragmented.⁶¹ Bill Murray, who has dedicated considerable time and effort to locating and researching local graves outside formal cemeteries, firmly believes that the couple's grave is located at Wunjunga near Upstart Bay, marked by a cairn of small boulders.⁶² However, Phillip Murray is convinced that a site on the adjoining Abbott Bay is more likely. He has been involved with a number of university-sponsored excavations associated with the grave and has communicated with a representative of the Pitkethlys's family in Scotland. Phillip has also investigated other aspects of the geography of Morrill's story, including the location of the wreck of the *Peruvian* and the site where the raft landed. His files on Morrill's story include many carefully annotated maps and plans. In the course of his investigations, Phillip has collaborated with Birri-gubba elder Jim Gaston. The two men have been on at least one trip to Mt Curlewis together, perhaps enabling Phillip to engage with Birri-gubba country in a qualitatively different way.⁶³

Through my conversations with Phillip and others, the perceived limits of academic disciplines such as archaeology, geography and history emerged as one of the forces at play in the retelling of Morrill's story. As Denis Byrne has observed of professional heritage workers (like myself), we tend to reproduce a segregated landscape as long as we continue to work within established fields of practice. Archaeology, with its emphasis on the material life of prehistory, attests to an Aboriginal presence in the landscape—almost everywhere on the continent, and for a very long time. Conversely, the discipline struggles to recognise Aboriginal knowledge and the relevance of the 'objects' it identifies to living Aboriginal people. At the same time, heritage histories can easily erase the Aboriginal presence from 'post-contact' spaces too, by focusing on archives and fields of human endeavour that do not include Aboriginal histories, relying on archaeology to document the Aboriginal presence in a place as 'prehistory'. While this does not necessarily reflect the practitioners' own beliefs or values as individuals, the result is nevertheless a disentangled history that looks a lot like Australia's history of segregation itself.⁶⁴ The conflict between settlers and the Birri-gubba people and their neighbours in the 1850s and

61 Major L. W. Hill to Mrs and Mrs Cottrell, 23 February 1979; Mr and Mrs Cottrell to Major L.W. Hill, 10 March 1979, file on the Pitkethlys's burial place, Phillip Murray, Private Collection, Townsville.

62 Bill Murray, in conversation with the author, 1 and 3 December 2010; Melissa Ketchell, 'Mystery Graves Found: Couple Shipwrecked in 1846', *Sunday Mail*, 24 November 2002, 40.

63 Phillip Murray, in conversation with the author, 3 December 2010.

64 Byrne, 'The Ethos of Return', 83.

1860s is well documented in the newspapers of the time and in published diaries and reminiscences of settlers themselves, and can be confidently included in histories of the region. However, other aspects of Morrill's personal story and his legacy are less readily explored from within the documentary history tradition.

In one of his local lectures, Phillip brought his psychological interests to bear by imagining a therapeutic session with Mrs Pitkethly, exploring what her feelings may have been as she encountered the Birri-gubba and was scrutinised by them. More cautious in his engagement with Morrill, Phillip turned our conversation to a novel that, by chance, I had read a few days earlier. The thesis of Alan J. Morris's novel, *The Sole Survivor*, is that Morrill survived with the Birri-gubba people because he reached out to them, relinquished his Britishness and accepted their teachings. Unlike the other castaways, Morrill recognised that he must assimilate to survive. When Alice Pitkethly's character said to Morrill, 'you're a good man, Jimmy ... but I'm afraid you're going to turn into one of them', he replied, 'yes Alice, if I'm to become a survivor I must become exactly like them'.⁶⁵ In narrating Morrill's willing and apt transformation into an Aboriginal man, as well as some of the dramas of his Aboriginal life, Morris engaged with a part of Morrill's experience that is not directly accessible through documentary sources, but must be imagined by those who are prepared to cast themselves away from the safe vessel of documented fact. Preferring not to confuse his historical understanding of Morrill's story with fiction, Phillip told me that he had decided not to read Morris's book.

One of my email correspondents, a keen local historian based in Ayr, Glenis Cislowski, furnished the following as part of her response to my query about Morrill's descendants:

James Ross Morrill married Ellen Flynn in 1889. They had Ellen born 1890/C7184, Gertrude born 1892/C11604, Dorcas Cecilia born 1894/C10951, Jane Isabel Morrill born 1898/C71078, Lorna Clare 1904/C11388, and Edith Ann born 1906/C10931. Dorcas married Robert Jack of Brandon. They had Percy and Dave Jack. Dorcas Cecilia Jack died 12/12/1970 and is buried in the Ayr Cemetery ... The Jack family still farm out past Brandon.

65 Morris, *The Sole Survivor*, prologue, 3. Morris thought of himself as inhabiting a chronologically segregated landscape as he wrote, dedicating his novel to 'the Brindle [sic] Tribal people who are now extinct'. Perhaps some of this freedom to imagine came from a conviction that no-one living could answer him.

A man with Morrill as his surname came into our workshop some years ago to get my husband to do a job for him. He claimed that he was a descendent of James Morrill and a native woman. It is openly stated that Morrill had a wife and family from the local tribe.⁶⁶

Whereas a precise account of the Jack family can be made, complete with dates of birth, birth certificate numbers, Christian and middle names, tracing Morrill's Aboriginal descendants back to him takes place through family stories. These two kinds of information can be genuinely difficult to combine into the same history. Glenis felt that I would not be able to include a family story like this in my doctoral thesis because it was not the sort of 'evidence' usually admitted to the scholarly realm. Her concern mirrored Bain Attwood's observation:

Aboriginal pasts occur in forms and forums that refuse to conform ... to the discipline of history's conventional protocols and procedures for determining whether an account of the past is factual and thus true or not.⁶⁷

Although historians are yet to find a single, perennial solution to this dilemma, there are many models for rigorous, reliable history that bring together qualitatively different kinds of evidence.

The Bowen Historical Society followed the usual disciplinary conventions in its retelling of Morrill's story. Dilys Maltby, one of the compilers of *James Morrill: His Life and Adventures* showed me around the society's museum. She was at ease with the idea that Morrill had most likely fathered children during his time with the Birri-gubba, and might have Aboriginal descendants who still live in the region. I recounted some of the more risqué and romantic detail of *A Sole Survivor* to Dilys and asked if she had read the novel. Some of the tutelage the fictional Morrill receives is from a young woman who becomes his wife after desire blossoms during their language sessions: 'she pointed to her lips and said sweetly "moolin". It was too much for Jimmy Morrill. He kissed her quickly as he repeated the word moolin and said loudly "kiss"'.⁶⁸ Dilys, who had not read the book, laughed and said it sounded plausible, after all he was a young man who had lived as part of the community for 17 years. She recalled that, in *Sketch of a Residence*, Morrill referred to the offer of a

66 Glenis Cislowski, correspondence with author care of Loftus Dun, 24 January 2011.

67 Attwood, 'Aboriginal History, Minority Histories', 177.

68 Morris, *The Sole Survivor*, 66. The pair's bonding over language is a more explicit rendition of the kind of affection and eroticism Kate Grenville imagined behind the vocabulary Pattenygarang and Lt. Dawes shared. Grenville, *The Lieutenant*, 158–65. See also Carter, 'Repetitions at Night', 81–82.

wife, but not whether he accepted or not. Dilys then told me that, over the past few years, a number of enquiries had been made at the museum by Aboriginal people who thought they might be Morrill's descendants, thinking that the society might hold information that would provide proof of this. The society's researchers told them that they were sorry, but there was no such proof as far as they knew. Dilys explained that this is why the museum's displays and their booklet about Morrill do not include reference to Morrill's Aboriginal descendants, because the society deals in verifiable facts, and there is no documentary proof in this case.⁶⁹

In promotional material, Morrill's story is cited as one of the main reasons to visit the museum;⁷⁰ yet, when I visited in 2010, Morrill occupied only a small corner—between geological specimens and a large, typographical-style display of Aboriginal weapons and tools, opposite the explorers' wall. Studio portraits of Morrill and his son, and a copy of the title deed for Morrill's lot on the corner of Brisbane and Poole streets, joined photographs of the 1964 monument and its dedication ceremony in which Morrill's granddaughters and step-granddaughters are pictured clustered around the monument. Although the society commemorates its own commemoration of Morrill—a relatively 'new' addition to Morrill's story—a way of including contemporary Birri-gubba stories touching on Morrill had not been found.

Berber Bevernage has made a study of the sense of chronology that is closely tied to the concept and process of reconciliation: the up-to-date, the destination and the desired future (as opposed to a past characterised by denial).⁷¹ It would be easy to say that Morrill's storytellers are *running late* for reconciliation, but the reality is more complex, as the landscape of the story is truly current. As a number of Birri-gubba groups pursue native title claims, as the Bowen Historical Society continues to tell a story of white discovery and progress, and as Loos attempts to bring

69 Dilys Maltby, in conversation with the author, 2 December 2010. The imperative to establish European-style family trees as good evidence for 'traditional ownership' within the native title system and elsewhere has provided the motivating factor for this kind of research within many Aboriginal communities. See Goodall, 'Telling Country', 184.

70 In 2011, the museum's 'Museum and Gallery Services' listing began: 'Did you know ... We hold records of the shipwrecked survivor, James Morrill, who lived for 17 years with Aborigines?' Museum and Gallery Services Queensland, Museum and Gallery Profiles, 'Bowen Historical Society and Museum', accessed 8 August 2011, www.magsq.com.au/01_cms/details.asp?ID=389 (site discontinued).

71 Bevernage, 'Writing the Past', 122–23.

the parties together, Morrill's story plays a part in regional 'matters of history—of possession and dispossession—[that] remain as important as they ever were'.⁷²

A reconciliation horizon is not the only possibility for Bowen. Local self-determination initiatives work towards other futures in which stronger legal and economic positions, from which Birri-gubba people can engage in social and cultural development on their own terms, are sought, rather than a resolution of histories.⁷³ Gillian Cowlshaw asked of history-making and identity in Bourke: what if the reproduction of difference and segregation is not understood as 'a pathology, a gaping wound that must be healed before normal life can begin again ... What if it is the disputation around the division that gives social life its meaning?'⁷⁴ Morrill's story, while it remains 'entangled' in Aboriginal and settler pasts and presents and their connections, provides a platform for the assertion of separate histories, not least through the tripartite narrative consolidated in *Sketch of a Residence* and its firm separation of ethnography from experience. Indeed, the story as it was told in *Sketch of a Residence* remains at the centre of things, unreconstructed but constantly re-contextualised. Precisely because of its brevity and sobriety, it remains capable of holding all manner of meaning.

72 Attwood with Doyle, *Possession*, 320.

73 Johnson, 'Reconciliation, Indigeneity', 189, 198.

74 Cowlshaw, 'On "Getting It Wrong"', 202.

This text is taken from *The Lives of Stories: Three Aboriginal-Settler Friendships*, by Emma Dortins, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.