

Part II. Landscape and Place

3. The redemptive frontier: a long road to nowhere

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This chapter is an invitation to journey along a tangle of tracks. The first track is a brief excursion across some of the analytic terrain. The analysis I present is founded in a theory and practice of dialogue. There are two main precepts for structuring ethical dialogue.¹ The first is that dialogue begins where one is, and thus is always situated; the second is that dialogue is open, and thus that the outcome is not known in advance. Openness produces reflexivity, so that one's own ground becomes destabilised. My concern here is with the first precept: to engage in dialogue as ethical practice one must understand one's own situatedness. One practical consequence of this precept is that our gestures toward others must not exclude analysis of our own histories, geographies, and cultures. I have been particularly attentive to our cultures of violence because their effect is to foreclose on dialogue before we even properly begin. The purpose in analysing violence is to understand where it is located and how it is embedded in our cultural work, and the end goal is to uncover paths that may lead toward reparative action in the world.

In a series of essays devoted to analysis of the frontier in Australian society, I have sought to interrogate violence in many of its contemporary forms.² I have argued that the frontier is a matrix of modernity, a time and place where modern culture simultaneously reveals its capacity for destruction and re-invents its own myth of creation. The conventional view of the frontier is that it is sequential: it is an historical moment of encounter that will be overcome by civilisation. This linear view obscures many things: the violence of civilisation, the coevalness of the frontier, the formative interactions of destruction and creation. To put it another way, the sequential theory of the frontier treats a tension-laden and interactive relationship as if it were a linear progression in which violence is always about to be overcome. In contrast, I contend that the frontier is a key site for reflexive critique of contemporary society.

The tension between presence and absence is integral to 'New World' frontier mythology. On the one hand the conquerors imagine themselves in the midst of savage people and wild places; on the other hand, the savage person and the wild place are defined by the absence of civilised man (the coloniser), and thus as living absences: *tabula rasa* (in respect of the people) and *terra nullius* (in

¹ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, p. 129.

² Rose, 'Reports from a Wild Country'; 'Hard Times'; 'Dark Times'; and 'Rupture and the Ethics of Care'.

respect of the land). Terra nullius is a particularly interesting concept for the way it combines presence – *terra*, with absence – *nullius*. The two are packed together in this one concept, and thus the one concept actually references relationship, interaction, and tension.

My purpose here is to examine frontier violence when the conquerors set out not to destroy but to redeem. As Richard Slotkin says, ‘the fable of redemption through immersion in the wilderness ... lies at the heart of the Myth of the Frontier.’³ The American myth offers redemption through violence very explicitly. In contrast, Liz Furniss draws an excellent comparison with the Canadian frontier, arguing that it is not violence but rather paternalistic benevolence that is the key to Canadian frontier mythology.⁴

In the Australian context we can locate a powerful stream of thinking that offers redemption through the landscape itself.⁵ Redemption through landscape suggests that this place – this continent – has a power that can act on people, provided that civilisation does not interfere. The foundational concept of terra nullius thus has the potential to say so much more than we might have thought. Our attention has been on the *nullius* part of the term, on this absence of ownership whose unmasking threw the nation into crisis. But we need to think also about the *terra* part of the term – this continent, and how settler Australians have imagined an elemental power of place.

My argument is that the desire for exclusive presence is itself an act of violence. I will follow one man’s flight to the frontier where I have encountered a site at which is visible much of what I am discussing: the conqueror’s knowledge of his own loss, his own experience of absence as emptiness, his own recoil at the implications of his morally conflicted presence. That is one of the journeys of the paper, as it tracks the life and work of the artist Ainslie Roberts.

A track of decolonisation

I began by discussing dialogue. The conqueror’s story is not the only story, and if I were to present the conqueror as if he stood alone I would perpetuate the violence I am seeking to work against. For that reason, I will begin with a track that aims toward decolonisation.

In 1997 I worked as the consulting anthropologist to the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Justice Gray, when he went to Central Mt Wedge station, northwest of Alice Springs, to hear a claim to Aboriginal traditional ownership of the relinquished pastoral lease. Central Mt Wedge, in Central Australia, is located between the Aboriginal communities of Yuendumu and Papunya. This

³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 246.

⁴ Furniss, *Burden of History*, and this volume.

⁵ See Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*.

is an extremely arid part of Australia, and the Mt Wedge area consists of hills and plains, with no rivers at all. There are few soakages, and only two rockholes of substantial size where the water has been regarded as permanent (although it has been known to fail). The station consists of 3245 square kilometers; it was taken up in 1947, much later than most of the stations in the Northern Territory.⁶

Some of the Aboriginal people for this country had fled into the area after the Coniston massacre in 1928, and had been adopted into the local groups. These groups moved in and out of neighbouring stations, alternating between life in the bush and station life. Some of them had been caught up in the brutal regime of Mt Doreen station where the station owner used them as slaves.

In 1947 Bill Waudby gained the grazing license over Central Mt Wedge. Waudby was not an experienced pastoralist at the time, and he relied on Aboriginal workers:

I was a pretty new chum at all this. As I say, I had a good team of Aborigines who knew what the game was about, and we managed to get along quite well, and we got the cattle home.⁷

Waudby had little difficulty recruiting Aboriginal labour: conditions on a number of the neighbouring stations were unbelievably bad, and Waudby was a decent bloke. When he took up the station, and proved to be a fair and reasonable man to work for, Aborigines who belonged there came to stay. Waudby kept the station running with Aboriginal labour until the mid-60s when drought and award wages altered the situation. Many of the Aboriginal workers then cleared out. Internationally acclaimed artists such as Daisy Jugudai Napaljarri, and Paddy Carroll Jungarrayi are Central Mt Wedge people who were introduced to commercial art in Aboriginal communities such as Papunya.

During this period of exile, people became committed to returning to their own country. In 1984 they started registering sacred sites on the station, and one of the senior men set up an outstation on the station. In 1987 they incorporated and were granted a community living area. The Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund purchased the station in 1995. In 1997 the claim was heard; in 1998 the Aboriginal Land Commissioner made the finding that the claimants were traditional owners within the terms of the Act, and the title was handed over to the Aboriginal traditional owners in 1999.

In the course of the claim, the traditional owners took us to a particularly spectacular site called Palka-karrinya, translated as 'Behold karrinya'. It is a monolith in a narrow gorge. Several Dreamings are located here, and the site is

⁶ This and following information is summarised from Vaarzon-Morel & Sackett, *Central Mount Wedge Land Claim*, and from Justice Grey, Aboriginal Land Commissioner, *Central Mount Wedge Land Claim No. 154*.

⁷ Vaarzon-Morel & Sackett, p. 27.

connected with a number of the Dreaming tracks of major significance in Central Australia, as well as having its own local significance. Along with these Dreaming connections, the monolith at Palka-karrinya was identified with the grandfather of a number of members of the group. Creation and the present moment were connected through a known human ancestor. On our approach some of the people communicated to him.

The site is not only a place of past action, but of present action; not only a source of life but also a repository for life. It is a mutually interactive place where encounters contribute to the lives of all the parties. Stephen Muecke gets into the thick of interactive relationships in his discussion of the signs he saw in his northern travels: these signs announced a 'site of significance'. Muecke takes a more subtle and action-oriented view:

Significance is the wrong word, these sites are not full of meanings, cluttered with signs like a library. Ask the locals: *something there* they will say.... You have to ask yourself, what has that site been doing over the years, getting people to do things, or producing meanings?⁸

Action toward a site is intended to be nurturant, and to elicit more life from the site. At Palka-karrinya women sang the bush plum Dreaming. The song is part of the work people do to keep the country productive or nurturant, and it is a communicative event as well. It tells the place that the people are here, and that they are doing the work that keeps the place engaged with everyday life and time.

In the context of the hearing women sang before the Judge as part of the evidence of their ownership. The song had the potential to influence legal proceedings as well as bush plums. Other demonstrations of ownership were presented in the form of art and ritual. Over the course of a day women of two groups made ground paintings, and danced and sang; a select portion of their actions were witnessed by the Judge and other men of the legal parties.

In sum, the traditional owners of Central Mt Wedge experienced the frontier under a number of historical positions: they experienced massacres, near slavery, starvation, chains, and floggings; they experienced the pastoral industry as valued workers; they removed into Aboriginal settlements such as Papunya, and gained national and international fame as artists. They launched a successful claim to land, and have regained a portion of their land under Aboriginal Freehold Title. Some of the oldest claimants experienced all of this in their own lifetimes. And in their extraordinary lives they learned and carried the knowledge that enabled them to engage reflexively in their own country – to act toward sites, and to be acted upon by sites.

⁸ Muecke, *No Road*, p. 35.

Flight to the frontier

In 1950 an advertising artist and executive named Ainslie Roberts woke up, got out of bed, and collapsed. He was subsequently diagnosed as being in the midst of a nervous breakdown, and when he was well enough to get out of bed again, his wife and his business partner decided the best thing to do would be to buy him a one-way ticket to Alice Springs. There he recovered almost instantaneously, and there he made some major decisions: to spend more time on his art, to ease himself out of the advertising industry, and spend as much time as possible in Central Australia.⁹ He was not the first Australian artist to go to the bush for inspiration; in fact, Sidney Nolan had made his famous trip to the Centre only two years earlier.¹⁰

According to Hulley, Roberts's biographer, Roberts was born in England in 1911. His parents were theosophists, which was a spiritual movement that aimed to blend the sacred wisdom of the East with the scientific materialism of the West. Roberts grew up in a home in which seances, photographs of the supernatural, and discussions of ectoplasm and other arcane matters were part of the domestic culture.

The family migrated to Australia in 1922 (when Roberts was eleven), and they spent the first months with relations on a farm in South Australia where he fell deeply in love with the bush. Once the family settled in Adelaide and Roberts was back in school he proved to be a top student and a gifted artist, but was unable to fulfil his early promise because he had to leave school at age fourteen. Over the years he put himself through art school, founded his own business, married and had a family, and achieved success in the world of commercial art.

In 1952, not long after his collapse and recovery, he met Charles Mountford, and the two of them became good friends. They started making short expeditions to the bush: Mountford to record rock art; Roberts to draw, paint and photograph. Mountford was an amateur ethnographer (he subsequently gained formal qualifications, but never found significant acceptance within the academic community). He had a great interest in Aboriginal art and culture, and the two men came to be collaborators in the retelling of Aboriginal myths, and the creation of works of art inspired by them. The first exhibit was in 1963; the first book came out in 1965. Both ventures were wildly successful. As Mountford said, 'No Australian artist has painted like this; he has followed no school – he has copied no previous artist'.¹¹

Mountford and Roberts made their first major expedition together in 1956, and (as you will have anticipated) they went to Central Mt Wedge station. Their host

⁹ This and subsequent information is summarised from Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*.

¹⁰ Schaffer, *In the Wake*, p. 153.

¹¹ Summarised from Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*; quote p. 85.

was Bill Waudby, and their Aboriginal guide was One Pound Jimmy, an Aboriginal man whose face was the most well known of Aboriginal faces because it had been reproduced on a 1950 series of Australian postage stamps.¹² The artist came back in 1966, just after his first big successes, and was flooded in for a month during an uncharacteristic period of rain.

The first visit, in particular, with its interactions with Aborigines and opportunities to gain an understanding of myth and landscape, was formative for Roberts. He made two visits to Palka-karrinya, and according to Hulley, 'of all the places in the North that Ainslie [Roberts] came to know, this is the one that would hold the most deeply personal meaning for him'.¹³

Roberts brought his fascination with this site to fruition in 1983, shortly before he died. Hulley says that the story Roberts knew and painted was that Palka-karrinya was sacred to an Owl Dreaming.¹⁴ In the course of the land claim a great deal of evidence concerning Palka-karrinya was presented to the Aboriginal Land Commissioner, and none of the public evidence made any mention of an Owl Dreaming. Let us simply hold to the fact that the site made a huge impression on Ainslie Roberts. According to Hulley, it 'would haunt his imagination until he could exorcise it in a major painting twenty-five years later'.¹⁵

This painting is not typical of Roberts's work, but it does go to the heart of his endeavour. He depicts a site, and alludes to a Dreaming or story for that site; the place and its power are refracted through the 'surrealism' of Roberts's imagination.¹⁶ Most of Roberts's paintings depict a more generic landscape. Similarly, most of the stories are unsourced; while specific, they are unlocated. In most of the work, most of the particular knowledge of place and people is erased and the final product speaks to a far more generalised sense of place and to a homogeneous mass of 'brown people'. A number of the books are dedicated to 'the brown people who handed down these Dreamtime Myths'.¹⁷ Not only are the storytellers generic, but they are positioned as putative ancestors who hand down stories – to us, when we read these books.

On the track of the lone artist

Whilst flooded in at Central Mt Wedge in 1966, Roberts painted directly on to the walls of the homestead. One painting is labeled 'Lasseter's Last Ride', and it

¹² *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 59. It is difficult to source this story properly, but it seems pertinent that a near identical story is told by Bill Harney, *Life Among the Aborigines*, p. 212. I have no explanation for why Roberts understood it differently. Probably there were miscommunications, perhaps it is more complicated.

¹⁵ Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*, p. 58.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁷ Roberts & Mountford, *The Dreamtime*, and *The Dawn of Time*.

can also be imagined as a self-portrait. The wedge-shaped hill is very similar to Central Mt Wedge.

Lasseter, as is well known, was a dreamer and a con artist who claimed to know the location of a gold reef in Central Australia, and in 1930 he got backing to mount an expedition. Although spectacularly unsuccessful, Lasseter's expedition added another chapter to the legend of gold in the Centre, and Lasseter himself, having died in the bush, became a legend in his own right. The story gained more popularity in 1931 with the publication of Ian Idriss's book *Lasseter's Last Ride*.¹⁸ In Ainslie's painting, the lonesome figure of Lasseter making his solitary way through the bush in search of a dream gives us a fair portrait of Roberts himself, as well as linking his project with the prominent 'motif of modern artist as nomad'.¹⁹

What did Ainslie Roberts think he was doing when he made his paintings of Aboriginal mythology? His description of his method tells us about his intent. He says that he studied the long versions of the myths, but that: 'The paintings always come first, and the big job is to get rid of me, the things I know, the conventional ideas I was taught and brought up with, so that the myth can come through. I become a channel, a communicator, scarcely a painter at all'.²⁰ He certainly acknowledges his debt to Aboriginal people: 'I just consider myself as the agent only, the communicator... I must always keep in mind my debt to the aborigines who created these myths ... If my paintings continue to be accepted as readily as the first exhibition, I have the opportunity and responsibility of communicating to my fellow whites that here is a rich culture that deserves to be noticed, respected, and explored...' Roberts held the view that Aboriginal culture was 'very old' and 'very nearly extinct', and he wanted his paintings to be 'speaking for an ancient culture'.²¹

The underlying theory of Roberts's art is the Jungian view that there are universal archetypes which manifest in myth, and which are present in the unconscious of all humans. Like Nolan and other modern Australian artists, Roberts claims universal significance for his work through its expressivity in relation to a universal consciousness or universal soul.²² To become a channel, for Roberts, was to open one's self to one's own unconscious, where one will connect with the universal archetypes which Aboriginal mythology also expresses. This theory of artistic channeling situates the artist as a medium through whom the archetypes, and by extension that which is universal in Aboriginal culture, can flow into the modern world.

¹⁸ Carment et al., *Northern Territory Dictionary of Biography*, pp. 176-7.

¹⁹ Schaffer, *In the Wake*, p. 155.

²⁰ Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*, p. 81.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 86.

²² Schaffer, *In the Wake*, pp. 152, 155.

There is a more historically conscious intention in Roberts's work as well. The generic landscapes and homogenous indigenous people he presents in his work are totally Australian, and his work contributed to the making of Central Australian landscapes occupied by Aboriginal people as a primary symbolic Australian landscape.²³

Mountford put his views on landscape and nationalism into words:

The spirit of a locality evolves from its history. By virtue of thousands of years of usage, the history of Australia belongs to the Aboriginal ... The white man, because of his relatively brief tenancy of Australia, lacks such rich identification. Access to the original spirit of the land can only be gained through the mind of the Aboriginal. Through his myths, his art and his ceremonies, we can catch a glimpse of history as old as time itself'.²⁴

I will set aside the gender issues here. In discussing Aboriginal action toward the place I have deliberately drawn on women's action in order to combat the generically gendered articulation of indigenous belonging.²⁵ Mountford apparently takes it as given that localities have a power or spirit, and he believes that the power or spirit of Australian localities can be accessed through Aboriginal people because of their long history here. The argument is that the shallowness of settler culture is due to its short chronology, and that it can be overcome by being grafted onto Aboriginal culture. It is thus a completely non-provocative theory of history. It rests on a sedimentary view of history and meaning, suggesting that both accumulate with time. It does not even dream of suggesting that shallowness might be linked to frontier violence or the concept of terra nullius.

Mountford's argument toward nationalism runs on a parallel track to Roberts's channeling of universalised archetypes. Whereas Roberts wanted to dip into what he believed to be a common pool and channel out messages that are both universal and located (at least at a continental scale), Mountford wanted to bore into historically grounded spirits of place, and thus to build up a modern history that connects with ancient powers. The artist and the anthropologist share this penetrative action in which Aboriginal people and their knowledge are mined to serve the interests of settlers. Even as Roberts attempted to channel respect for Aboriginal people, he was erasing their own particularity, their own representations, their own knowledges. And as he erased theirs he superimposed his own visions of what he imagined might once have been theirs.

²³ See Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*. My discussion here parallels that of Dorst who writes that the American West is 'a primary symbolic landscape through which the nation defines itself and the face by which it is most readily recognized throughout the rest of the world.' Dorst, *Looking West*, p. 102.

²⁴ Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*, p. 85.

²⁵ Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*.

In Mountford's nationalistic theory of the power of place the relationship of channeling seems to be reversed. The white man uses Aboriginal culture as a channel to sacred geography and to history. So, on the one hand, Roberts claims or hopes to channel myths into modernity. On the other hand, Mountford hoped Aboriginal culture would channel or bore the white man's presence into the landscape. In both forms of encounter we see the tension between desire and erasure, presence and absence, love and violence. This is nationalism in the settler society mode. Its own autogenesis is enacted through the dynamic tensions of love and death. Thomas suggests in his article 'Home décor and dance' that the business of simultaneously exhibiting and exterminating natives is part of the enduring invasive logic of a settler colonial nation.²⁶ Philip Deloria makes a similar point concerning the United States: that American (settler) identities are 'built not around synthesis and transformation, but around unresolved dualities themselves'. Those dualities include the simultaneous desire to exalt and 'extirpate' the Indian.²⁷

This tension finds a complex articulation in the work of Mountford and Roberts. Commercially their collaborations were enormously successful. Roberts's first exhibit sold out in two days, a subsequent exhibit sold out in two hours; there was a waiting list of persons wishing to buy paintings. The books sold out and were reprinted; they remained in print for over 20 years, and thus became an Australian publishing phenomenon.²⁸ Along with the widespread enthusiasm, there was also criticism. At the time, many critics spoke of appropriation. Hulley took those criticisms seriously and sought to answer them by claiming that the intent was not to replicate Aboriginal art, but to find a new western art. He wrote, 'the paintings have nothing to do with the forms of Aboriginal art. They relocate this timeless material in a Western inner landscape. They do not falsify it, for in itself it is the product of something universal; but they give it a new range, and a wider context of immediacy'.²⁹ Hulley's reclamation of integrity is arrived at through recourse to this universal and timeless common pool. So the colonising logic of exhibition and erasure goes round and round.

The appropriative elements of both nationalist and universalising encounters are the subject of huge amounts of analysis, and, more recently and more interestingly, of law suits over the copyright of intellectual property. I would just note that in both nationalist and universalising contexts, the theory of a universal unconscious quite conveniently displaces indigenous people as the privileged artists and experts of their own culture. It treats Aboriginal knowledge as an ore body that could be mined by anyone with the talent for tapping into

²⁶ Thomas, 'Home décor and dance', p. 28.

²⁷ Deloria, *Playing Indian*, p. 185.

²⁸ Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*, p. 112.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 99.

the unconscious. This invasion via mysticism replicates the process of colonisation of land; it discovers, claims, and opens up indigenous culture as another unowned region, a cultural terra nullius.

Furthermore, while mysticism can be seen to be in contradiction to the pragmatics of both colonisation and modernity, the Mountford/Roberts project is in its structure completely modern. It claims access to universals, and it breaks, dissects and fragments in order to find the meanings of things.³⁰ It breaks into the mother lode of inspiration, pulling out and disconnecting pieces, and reducing parts to fragments. It relocates the fragments into new configurations and it markets this new work with a claim for non-native authenticity. The authenticity or integrity of the market product is based in part upon the fragments of an indigenous life world, which are worked into the piece or alluded to by the piece, which claims to transcend them.

There is a hollowness at the heart of this enterprise that is exactly the hollowness and emptiness created by more familiar frontier violence. One name for this hollowness is monologue: it constitutes its own closed circle and declares that circumscribed arena to be the true basis of all culture. As Said says, it mistakes 'one idea as the only idea'.³¹

Hulley tells a story which he believes symbolised the spiritual meaning of the 1956 trip for Roberts: 'As he walked through a ... [stone arrangement] on the east side of the hill, he picked up a sacred stone that lay there, broken into two pieces. Joining the pieces together in his hand, he stood for a long time looking down at them'.³² There is an amazing amount of information about the modern artist and about redemption through landscape expressed and exposed in this little story. The white man fled civilisation and went to the frontier. He went with a white expert in Aboriginal matters, and with a love of Central Australia and respect for Aboriginal people. Whilst there, and ostensibly under the guidance of an Aboriginal man, he went walking around alone and he found what he took to be the broken remnants of Aboriginal culture. This is to say that he found confirmed in a stone his own expectations of what Aboriginal culture could be – ancient and nearly extinct.³³ The meanings he attributed to the stone – that it was sacred, that it was broken (in the sense that it should have been whole), that it needed to be mended – these meanings, as far as we know, were solely in his imagination. With his own two hands he tried to make these broken pieces whole again, and in that act he found a mission. He would heal himself by restoring or repairing Aboriginal culture.

³⁰ I am drawing a brief point out of a much more complex argument presented by Everdell, *The First Moderns*.

³¹ Said, 'The text', p. 188.

³² Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*, p. 66.

³³ *ibid.*, 86.

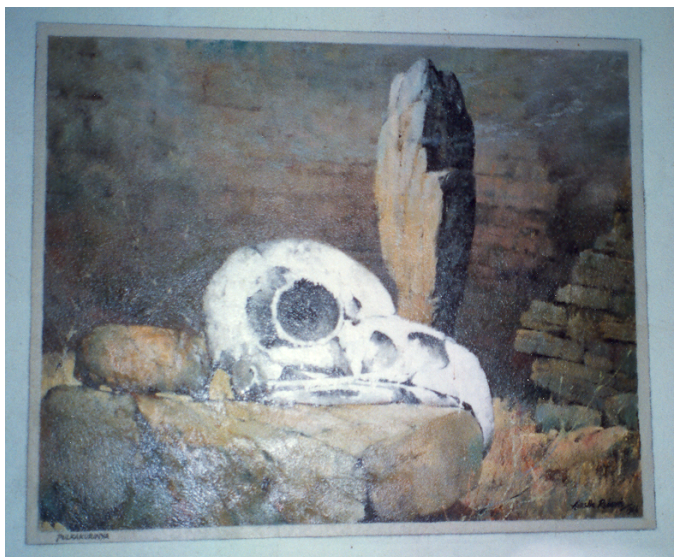
According to Hulley's account of this pivotal event, Ainslie Roberts did all of this as a solitary act. He did not ask One Pound Jimmy (or even Mountford) about the place, the stones, or the need for healing. Indeed, One Pound Jimmy does not seem to figure in this vignette at all. The guidance of this Aboriginal man meant a lot to both Mountford and Roberts, but it seems they wanted him to navigate and to answer questions as asked. On the basis of available information, One Pound Jimmy was asked to walk, point, carry, and provide pieces of information. His circumscribed presence enables us to realise how deeply Roberts was on a white man's quest. One Pound Jimmy facilitated the journey; he *travelled* with the white men, but he did not *journey* with them.³⁴

As I read the accounts of the interactions with One Pound Jimmy, it looks to me like he was treated as a marvelous repository of fragments – an ore body in his own right. I am not accusing Roberts of using a poor methodology, of failing to consult, or of being insensitive to Aboriginal people's knowledge and feelings, although all of these things might, anachronistically but realistically, be said. What fascinates me is the solitariness of it all. This is monologue: the self talking to the self, and the self structuring encounters so that he will hear only reflections of the self. Violence lurks here: in monologue, where the possibilities for dialogue are erased. Roberts's experience with the stone is a solitary act of imaginary repair. It is emblematic of the larger project, and captures both the longing for a transcendent presence and the erasure of the real people and knowledge of the place. These two intertwined acts of imagination – longing for an imaginary presence / oblivion toward the real presence of others – together configure the violence of frontier redemption.

Let us recall that 'of all the places in the North that Ainslie [Roberts] came to know, ... [Palka-karrinya was] ... the one that would hold the most deeply personal meaning for him'.³⁵ This painting is on the wall in the kitchen at the old Waudby homestead on Central Mount Wedge. It was painted in 1966, just a few years after Roberts's first public successes. It is labeled 'Palka-karrinya', but for me it is a stunningly insightful portrait of the frontier.

³⁴ See Mathews for a discussion of the difference between travel and journey.

³⁵ Hulley, *Ainslie Roberts*, p. 56.



The painting leaches all the colour from the country, and shrinks the stone to a peanut. The foreground is an oversized skull, which I take to be an eagle skull, but it could be any predatory bird. It is not asking too much to see the predatory skull as *both* the colonising project and the artist himself. Death dominates here. The eye socket is a reversed telescope, making everything seem small, distant, and terribly faded. This frontier gaze kills the country; we see that very clearly. Through the reversed telescope of the death head the sacred site looks lost and lifeless. Not just its presence, but its meanings too are absorbed, erased, strained through the dominating eye socket of death. The artist came for redemption; he imagined a mission to make whole that which had been broken by frontier violence, but here he recognises himself as one of the predators.

Dancing for Palka-karrinya

Ainslie Roberts's death head exposes the open secret at the heart of terra nullius – that *nullius*, the erasure, ends up destroying the beloved *terra*.

Frontier redemption is here displayed as a violent commingling of desire and death. The violence is omnipresent because what settlers desire they cannot achieve without killing everything in the long run. Desire produces death. Death produces a hollowness that fills with desire. Desire produces more death. Ainslie Roberts showed us this when his desire to paint outback Australia took him to Palka-karrinya. His long-term action toward the site was to imagine it on paper and on canvas. On the kitchen wall in the Central Mount Wedge homestead it may be that he painted the devastating knowledge that he had nothing to give that could enhance the life of the place.

When we were at Central Mt Wedge for the land claim, we camped in the old Waudby homestead. We lived with these paintings and I, for one, couldn't eat in the kitchen. I worried about our own gaze – it seemed to flatten everything before us. We dredged the mother lode for evidence, and roamed voraciously across landscapes, lives, sites, and ritual actions. I told myself that we were there to listen, and that from this courtroom drama could come legal standing with respect to the land that would make a genuine difference in the life of the place and the people. This was true, and I am not aiming to denigrate a piece of legislation that was benevolent in its inception and that is radically altering power relations in the Northern Territory. Nor would I wish to denigrate the evident pride and pleasure with which the traditional owners displayed their knowledge. Legal practice, however, ensured our right to know a great deal, and I slipped back and forth between an appreciation of the positive aspects of this drama, and an awareness of the predatory quality of our high beam gaze as it worked across other people's lives in search of the bits and pieces that it labels evidence.

In the interests of natural justice, evidence in a land claim has to be accessible. People's words are recorded, translated if necessary, transcribed, and printed out for all to consult, except in the case of 'restricted' evidence that is not freely available to all but is fully available, as appropriate, within the context of the judicial process. Legal practice, formulated to protect the interests of all parties, fragments knowledge before it even encounters it because it asserts that some, and only some, forms of information count as evidence. The best lawyers cast a narrational net over the fragments and pull them into a drama of proof. Cross-examining lawyers seek to undo the drama – to hammer, probe, disconnect, and thus further to disintegrate the bits and pieces that were, in any case, fragments to begin with.

At Central Mt Wedge, as on many other land claims, Aboriginal people interrupted legal practice. At Palka-karrinya and other sites they sang. These were beautiful moments: people's faces lit up, their voices rose and worked in the gorges, resonating to the place, and filling the area with invocative communication. Back at camp, people made paintings on the ground and on their bodies. They sang the country as they painted it, and they sang it as they danced it. Their performatives were for the country, and at the same time they captured legal practice and brought it into their own law. People melded the power of place with their own performative power to convince everyone present that they were the owners of the place in their own terms as well as in the terms of the Land Rights Act. Their action folded legal practice, its flattening gaze and its fragmenting search for evidence, into reparative and regenerative ritual.



My analysis has landed me back in the binary stated so succinctly by Stephen Muecke: Aborigines are providing the eros to our thanatos.³⁶ He has a good point, and even as we reject binaries in favour of the more complicated and entangled journeys of life in the time of rapidly shifting powers, it is proper, I believe, to honour eros wherever it may be found. With that in mind, I wish to note that Roberts's work appeared at a time when relations between Aboriginal people and settler-descended people were on the cusp of major change. He hoped that his work would foster respect among white people for Aboriginal people, and his immensely popular work helped bring about the social changes that led to citizenship, land rights, and the Mabo decision. In spite of what now appears as an overwhelming presence of thanatos, Roberts gave eros a worm hole into settler consciousness.

Mountford spent a large portion of his life studying Aboriginal cultural fragments, and his views about the spirit of place were perceptive in their insistence on the locality of it all. But while the work carried out by traditional owners may indeed have its roots in millennia of history (as Mountford contended), the power of place continues in the world not out of some passivity of endurance or timeless universalism. The power of place is interactive, reflexive, mutual. The Aboriginal owners of this place do the work that keeps the place vital, active in the world, and reflexively engaged with living time. The

³⁶ Muecke, *No Road*, p. 15.

astonishing thing about frontier violence is that death does not always have the final word.

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4. Transcending nostalgia: pastoralist memory and staking a claim in the land

Nicholas Gill

The strength of Australian outback mythology in providing a blueprint for what Australian society, landscapes and history ought to be, lies at least partly in its 'lack of specificity in time and space'¹, coupled with retrospect. Deborah Bird Rose has argued that such free-floating retrospect diverts attention from 'here and now of our lives', and militates against dealing with the consequences of Australia's colonial past and present.² The inland and north of Australia, the so-called 'frontier', in a spatial sense, are, and have been, places where optimistic non-indigenous assessments of land have been subject to regular appraisal and debate.³ They are also areas where the treatment and status of indigenous people have remained significant social and political issues, and where national and regional conflicts over indigenous land ownership and title have been most focused, particularly in relation to extensive pastoralism. Despite this, outback, or frontier, mythology remains important in providing symbols and normative ideals that shape perceptions and landscapes of the inland and north. The avenues by which this occurs are manifold and are diffused across Australian political and cultural life.

This chapter examines one avenue by which pastoral landscapes are represented and validated, the production of pastoral memory and historical writing from the Alice Springs pastoral district in the southern Northern Territory (NT). This analysis arises from fieldwork and examination of documentary sources undertaken in the period 1996–98.⁴ The production and consumption of memory and history in the Alice Springs area are significant for the authority they carry at various scales, but particularly in the context of the NT⁵ where differences in indigenous and non-indigenous values, aspirations and interpretations of the past are features of everyday life and politics.

Recent debates over the future of land use and management in the inland and conflicts over the existence of native title on pastoral leasehold land have

¹ Rose, 'Rupture and the Ethics of Care in Colonized Space'; Rose, 'Australia Felix Rules, Ok!'.
² *ibid.*

³ Ratcliffe, *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: the Adventures of a Biologist in Australia*; Heathcote, *Back of Bourke: A Study in Land Appraisal and Settlement in Semi-arid Australia*; Heathcote, 'Drought in Australia: A Problem of Perception'; Powell, 'Taylor, Stefansson and the Arid Centre: An Historic Encounter of "Environmentalism" and "Possibilism"'; Heathcote, 'Manifest Destiny, Mirage and Mabo: Contemporary Images of the Rangelands'.

⁴ Gill, 'Outback Or At Home?: Environment, Social Change and Pastoralism in Central Australia'.

⁵ Riddett, 'Think Again: Communities Which Lose Their Memory: The Construction of History in Settler Societies'.

illustrated many aspects of contemporary frontier ideologies in Australia.⁶ These conflicts are struggles not only over land as a material resource, as a factor of production, but also over landscapes as loci of personal, group and national identity, meaning, belonging, experience and what Furniss calls the 'burden of history', the consequences of indigenous dispossession.⁷ These struggles are not simply over legal property rights, but also over property rights grounded in moralities based in relationships to land. These are matters of legitimacy, not simply legality. Confronted by the consequences of past acts of Aboriginal dispossession, and the survival of Aboriginal cultures, rural settler Australians have largely looked to the land to build a sense of legitimacy, and to tell a story of benign settlement, rather than state-sanctioned and enforced land occupation and control of indigenous people.

In inland Australia, where the physical transformations of agriculture have not been possible and are not visually evident, the strategies required for this have been somewhat different than in other areas. As elsewhere,⁸ however, the strategies of legitimation and the mutually constitutive process of building identities and landscapes, has relied, at least partially, upon particular traditions of remembering the past to interpret the present and to provide normative guidance for the future.

It might be imagined that Australian outback mythology with its images of vast stations, droving, skilled horse work, and dusty and laconic stockworkers would provide a solid basis for pastoralists to establish a legitimate place in the land. Certainly, it is an influential mythology and has a place in the cultural politics through which pastoral landscapes are maintained symbolically and materially. Outback mythology is, however, not a monolithic edifice. As to whether it alone can constitute a mythology adequate for the maintenance of pastoral landscapes among contemporary (post)colonial politics of land is more questionable. There are two ways in which this may be seen. First, is the adequacy of this conventional outback mythology in relation to how pastoralists see themselves. We should not assume that popular, dare I say urban, conceptions of outback lands and people, are consistent with identities and conceptions held by those who dwell within lands characterised as 'outback'⁹. We are familiar with this in relation to critiques of non-indigenous perceptions of indigenous people,¹⁰ but less so in relation to non-rural perceptions of rural, non-indigenous people.

⁶ Heathcote, 'Manifest Destiny, Mirage and Mabo: Contemporary Images of the Rangelands'; Hiley, *The Wik Case: Issues and Implications*.

⁷ Furniss, *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community*.

⁸ Dominy, 'Lives Were Always Here: The Inhabited Landscape of the NZ High Country'; Dominy, 'The Alpine Landscape in Australia: Mythologies of Ecology and Nation'; Furniss, *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community*.

⁹ Fergie, 'Unsettled'.

¹⁰ Sackett, 'Promoting Primitivism: Conservationist Depictions of Aboriginal Australians'.

Pastoralists do not see their identity as wholly portrayed in the heroism of the conventional outback tale, they do not find their conception of their place in the land wholly provided for in such narratives.

Second, even as outback mythology celebrates the pastoral industry, it is also characterised by emptiness, wilderness and arguably, by settler transience in the face of a land that has not been transformed according to the mythical progression from wilderness to garden. In the conventional outback tale, the wilderness remains ever present. Without the transformative self-evidence of agriculture and the emergence of a 'garden' landscape, pastoralism remains either imaginatively or imminently absent and its roots in the land remain tenuous. As seen in the Native Title debates in 1996-98, many critics of pastoralists described pastoral lands in terms of vastness and emptiness, and suggested that pastoral leasehold tenure provided merely a readily removed veneer of occupation rather than a more deeply rooted presence.¹¹ For pastoralists, then, imaginatively establishing permanence, persistence and presence has emerged as an important aspect of establishing legitimacy for their place on the land.

Memory and public history in central Australia

Historical tales play a key role in Central Australian assertions of legitimacy. Pastoral historical narratives of self and land locate people and activities in time and space. They link the present to a past that provides much to guide pastoralists' normative views of the present and future. History, for the pastoralists of Central Australia, has become an important means by which to present their sense of belonging in a landscape generally seen in Australia as one from which the frontier has not fully passed.¹² Outback mythology provides little room for settlers to hold the reciprocal relationships with land central to culturally legitimate occupation. Historical accounts of settlement are one forum in which the establishment of such relationships between pastoralist and land occurs and are placed into public history.

Times of social change can spark 'crises of individual and collective remembering'.¹³ Central Australian pastoralists appear to be going through such a phase as their vision of Central Australia is eroded. For example, Judy Robinson, local historian and member of a pastoral family, worries that the labours of early pastoral families are being forgotten, and has expressed concern that pastoralists are being 'pushed out of [their] own history'.¹⁴ One of the outcomes of this anxiety, and of the sense that the 'pioneering generation' is rapidly disappearing, is a small body of biographical and autobiographical texts that recall pastoral

¹¹ Horstmann, 'The Dead Heart of the Wik Backlash'.

¹² Rose, 'Australia Felix Rules, Ok!'

¹³ Pred, 'Memory and the Cultural Reworking of Crisis: Racisms and the Current Moment of Danger in Sweden, or Wanting it Like Before'.

¹⁴ Northern Territory Archives Service TP 858/1 and interview with author 26/10/96.

settlement. Recent texts include Robinson's story of her family in 'Bushman of the Red Heart' and Powell's 'By Packhorse and Buggy'.¹⁵ These histories are important for they are a means by which pastoralist memory authoritatively enters the public realm and contemporary struggles over land, landscape and identity. They 'transcend nostalgia'¹⁶ because of their role in naturalising Central Australia as a pastoral landscape and in constituting Central Australian history through pastoralism. In the dominant whitefella culture of the NT, these histories, and the memories that they embody, gain authority partly through a claimed direct and unmediated access to the past. In this culture, such exclusive access to the 'pastoral true story'¹⁷ of the NT, grants a vantage point from which to interpret and shape the present.

Memory, however, is not simply a passive process by which objective records of the past are retrieved. Both individual and group memory is an active social process, located, like all human activities, within race, class and gender and other social relations. Memory is constituted as individuals and groups seek coherency and meaning in the past, and is as much a product of the present as the past. Memories are built up as groups and individuals tell their stories, receive additional information or criticism and modify their stories for retelling. In this process, while the stories may change, there are key elements that provide stability and consistency over time.¹⁸ This process of building memories and group histories is so much a part of everyday life that we:

Fail to recognise not only why we alter history but often that we do. Thus we tend to misconceive the past as a fixed verity from which others have strayed but to which we can and should remain unswervingly faithful.¹⁹

Shared memory is a key building block in the development of group identity and culture. Memory is the medium through which a group develops and traces a shared past, shared meanings and shared values. Through collective identification of the material and symbolic signposts that mark a group's past, a sense of continuity, stability and legitimacy develops.²⁰

In the public histories of pastoral Central Australia, the authors write of the constitution of the Central Australian landscape through pastoral settlement and station development. In the process, signposts of shared significance are created

¹⁵ Powell and McRae, *By Packhorse and Buggy*; Robinson, *Bushman of the Red Heart: Ben Nicker 1908-1941*.

¹⁶ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*.

¹⁷ Hill, *The Rock: Travelling to Uluru*.

¹⁸ Barclay, 'Schematization of Autobiographical Memory'; Brewer, 'What is Autobiographical Memory'.

¹⁹ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*.

²⁰ *ibid.*; Edensor, 'National Identity and the Politics of Memory: Remembering Bruce and Wallace in Symbolic Space'.

and a sense of landscape accretion through pastoral lives and labour built up. There are a number of key features to this process in the histories.

History begins – the arrival as homecoming

In the pastoral histories such as those listed above, the arrival by pastoral families in Central Australia constitutes a key moment in delineating a past that is gone and a present that is about to unfold. The story of a land without history, a tabula rasa upon which the settlers could create not only a new nation, but also fresh lives and new starts for themselves in a youthful landscape unwearied by humanity is an old one in Australian historiography.²¹ The currency and continued publication of histories that reiterate this theme indicate that it is one that is not necessarily losing its vigour. The journeys to Central Australia by early pastoral families such as the Nickers, Price and Chalmers²² feature significantly in pastoral historical narratives.

These three families were coming to Central Australia after problems and losses elsewhere. Central Australia represented a new start. For example, the Nicker family came to the Centre and saved for years to buy a station in order to 'leave behind their former lives and start again beyond the boundaries of what they had individually experienced'.²³ Initially the land tests these families, throwing up unfamiliar landscapes, aridity and seemingly impenetrable mountain ranges. Ultimately, however, the land softens in the accounts, and becomes welcoming and full of potential. The station envisaged by these families seems to only require labour to assume their full but quiescent form.

In the published accounts, the arrival of these families at the sites of their future homesteads is portrayed as much homecoming as arrival. After saving for eleven years, the Nicker family is able to purchase Ryans Well station. Their arrival there is a transition from harshness to verdant bucolism:

Yesterday they had trailed across a spinifex plain, relieved by sparse grey shrubbery and this morning everything had changed. They'd wound across a creek-bed in a gap in the Hann Ranges where pine trees sprinkled the hillsides and gums nodded in the early morning breeze. Bloodwoods harboured flights of brilliantly-green budgerigars and cockatoos prattled raucously as they wheeled and dipped.

Past the gap, they came into a wide, shallow valley where shadows dappled their road and softer grasses and herbage grew more abundantly.

²¹ Hamilton, 'The Knife Edge: Debates About Memory and History'.

²² Ford, *Beyond the Furthest Fences*; Powell and McRae, *By Packhorse and Buggy*; Robinson, *Bushman of the Red Heart: Ben Nicker 1908-1941*.

²³ *ibid.*

The fierce spinifex lay behind them was restrained from entering or infringing by the stolid demarcation of the Hann Hills²⁴

From the Nicker's first camp at the future site of their homestead, Robinson paints a picture of a family at home and at peace in this landscape: 'there weren't any walls to surround them but they were home'.²⁵ This arrival is also represented as a new beginning, of activity and life not known by this landscape:

An owl 'whoo-d enquiringly at all the unaccustomed activity and who could doubt his question because rarely had there been such movement, so many people, animal and sounds within his knowledge. He settled himself on a branch of a mulga tree and absorbed these new sights, swivelling his head now and then towards a new sound. The fire's glow mesmerised him. It was beyond his ken.'²⁶

The fundamental story being told in these accounts of arrival is of the *discovery* of a pastoral landscape. The pastoral landscape does not have to be created; it already exists. It exists in an unformed state, and requires only labour to bring out its full potential and to make it a place for family life. In effect, the 'arrival tales' in these pastoralist accounts begin the pastoral story of a process that went on for many years, and which through labour, revealed the envisaged stations much as a sculptor reveals the sculpture within the stone. It is also a landscape that is largely empty of Aboriginal people. Those who are present are generally those who become 'trusted companions' and childminders. They are, except in Ford's²⁷ account that emphasises benign paternalism on the part of pastoralists, presented as isolated and alienated figures, rather than as coherent groups of landowning people. Consistent with the portrayal of a virginal land, the pastoral histories do not generally canvas the possibility of settler-caused Aboriginal dispersal and fragmentation prior to the arrival of the settler protagonists.

The new day dawning in such accounts involved transforming this welcoming but 'untouched' landscape into a home. The welcoming nature of the places which were to become homestead sites and centres of family life stands in stark contrast to stories of struggle, sacrifice and loss that also pervade pastoral narratives. The apparent poles of welcome and struggle are not, however, incompatible in the pastoral story. Both are important constituents of it and together tell a story of a land that, in pastoral culture, is harsh and often fickle, but which is fundamentally productive and which rewards faith in its capacity to support those who stay and learn its ways.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Ford, *Beyond the Furthest Fences*.

Indeed at this early stage some key elements of the pastoral story of Central Australia are emerging. In the accounts, the families are forced to engage with the land early on, mentally and physically, to reach their destinations and the possibilities, harshness notwithstanding, they still envision. The qualities of endurance and patience in the face of the land's enormity and implacability are highlighted. This quality, to become a key element in pastoral relationships to land, is seen not only in the families' continued faith in what lay ahead but also in their dogged acceptance of the trials imposed by the cycles of flood and drought. As pastoralists would see it, this is the beginning of an acceptance of the hardships of Central Australia. For pastoralists, this acceptance brings a morality to their presence in the country. In the pastoral histories, the land enfolds and engulfs the pastoralists. Pastoralists use and extract from the land, but are ultimately unable to significantly transform it as the spatial and temporal enormity of the land overshadows them, yet simultaneously shapes and sustains them, rewarding their persistence. In Central Australian cattle culture, the persistence is significant in setting pastoralists apart from others and in claiming a legitimate and righteous presence. That the land rewards faith and persistence is illustrated in these accounts most clearly by events in the years following arrival.

The land is transformed

In the years that followed arrival the pastoral narrative trace the development of a pastoral community and the landscape it inhabits. Tents and bough sheds gave way to homesteads and families grew. The landscape is domesticated and native and stock animals are both equally naturalised in the land.

Powell's²⁸ description of a 1920s childhood visit to the Bloomfields Loves' Creek station, east of Alice Springs illustrates the nature of this domesticated landscape. Powell weaves European stock seamlessly into the landscape. They were visiting Atnarpa on Love's Creek in order to purchase horses. There was 'lush and plentiful grass. We saw kangaroos everywhere ... there were quite a few joeys ... we also saw a flock of seven emus and several wedge tail eagles'.²⁹ The horses at Atnarpa 'were all such beautiful animals'³⁰ that it was hard to make a selection. As the unwanted horses were released and galloped off 'they made a fine sight'.³¹

In this account there is a richness and productivity to Central Australia and a unifying acclamation of native flora and fauna, and of the European world of yards, stock skills, and fine horses. Such childhood memories describe a blooming Central Australia. This is not a barren and difficult landscape, but one in which

²⁸ Powell and McRae, *By Packhorse and Buggy*.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

settlers' animals and enterprises are thriving, at home in a landscape that is rewarding their efforts.

European stock also materially transforms the land in pastoral memory. From her vantage point on the homestead verandah at Ryan's Well, Liz Nicker watches the country:

The country around them grew better with every wet. From the homestead vantage point Liz noticed an improvement in grasses and a slow but steady greening and developing density of shrubbery. Because she was a gardener at heart, she believed the cattle were responsible. Their hooves broke up the topsoil and their bodily waste nourished the soil. Where they foraged on low bush branches, the canopy grew taller and shaded more grasses and infant trees. Moving away from their watering places, they distributed grass and herbage which better anchored what already grew. Every hoof indent left a cradle for new seeds to develop, protected from wind on the open plains and held little pockets of water when it rained.³²

This belief in the 'gardening' effect of stock remains widespread among pastoralists today.³³ This observation and belief has material aspects but its true import lies in the manner these observations have entered and informed pastoral culture. It is not only that cattle have changed the landscape; they are seen as at least partially responsible for creating what is seen today, and as having improved it. The pastoral presence is thus written everywhere on the very structure of the land itself, not only through the visibility of homesteads, bores, fences and other pastoral infrastructure. Stories about these environmental changes circulate within the pastoral community and pastoral families.

On one level, these narratives might be dismissed as mere romanticism for a golden rural past. Rural nostalgia, however, is rarely as innocent as its surface form might suggest.³⁴ In a pastoral culture where deeply embedded presence and insider/outsider identity counts in the cultural politics of land,³⁵ these histories do more than establish an early presence. They establish a role in the very creation of a Central Australia that pastoralists take as the norm and which takes its form from the pastoral industry. This presence and its geographies are given moral weight in the narratives. For example, the stability and strength of the pastoral settlers is emphasised and contrasted with the mobility and fecklessness of miners. Moreover, pastoral settlement is not associated with the

³² Clewett and Smith, et al. *Australian Rainman Version 3: An Integrated Software Package of Rainfall Information for Better Management*; Robinson, *Bushman of the Red Heart: Ben Nicker 1908-1941*.

³³ Gill, 'Outback or at Home? Environment, Social Change and Pastoralism in Central Australia'.

³⁴ Williams, *The Country and the City*.

³⁵ Gill, 'The Contested Domain of Pastoralism: Landscape, Work and Outsiders in Central Australia'.

wider colonising processes that made the land available for settlement by non-indigenous people. Settler actions seem to take place within a self-contained world. The infamous children's home, the 'Bungalow', recently described as the 'government's most determined act of social engineering by segregation'³⁶ and which was part of a suite of measures by which settlers intensively regulated the Aboriginal population, is represented in one account as the outcome of the impulses of generous and giving folk. It is described as a creation of the townspeople of Stuart (Alice Springs) as a means of providing for the Aboriginal children left behind by miners. Pastoralists are described as doing their bit by getting into the 'habit of dropping off beef'.³⁷

Knowing the land

The land itself features significantly in pastoral history. The focus however, is not the land itself, but the evolution of pastoral society and landscapes. In this development, the bodily aspects of memory take on significance as the pastoral body and land permeate each other through physical presence, observation and labour.

In a complex and arid biophysical environment that is highly variable in time and space³⁸ and greatly variable in its ability to support stock, pastoralists require a good knowledge of their land. For example, to control their herds, particularly prior to widespread fencing and establishment of sub-artesian bores, pastoralists needed considerable knowledge of the limited natural waters and of where cattle were likely to congregate. In many cases, pastoralists were often dependent on local Aboriginal people in these regards, at least initially, although this is not generally evident in these pastoral histories.

Pastoralists gain this knowledge through work and experience. They come to gain not only knowledge of the physical features and layout of the land, but also to develop a way of knowing it that provides them a place within it. This knowing is specific to their mode of land use and occupation, and arises in part from the variability of the land.

The Chalmers, Price and Nicker families all had sheep. Whereas cattle can be largely left to their own devices much of the time, sheep required shepherding. For this reason, they had largely disappeared from the area by the 1960s. Shepherding sheep forced the Chalmers to engage in some desperate searches for water that almost cost the lives of family members. New to Central Australia and to arid zone pastoralism, the Chalmers were reassured by rainfall records that indicated regular summer rainfall and by assurances from 'old timers in the

³⁶ Rowse, *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia*.

³⁷ Robinson, *Bushman of the Red Heart: Ben Nicker 1908-1941*.

³⁸ Friedel and Foran, et al. 'Where the Creeks Run Dry or Ten Feet High: Pastoral Management in Arid Australia'.

district, that in at least twenty years of history there had never failed to be a rain before Christmas'.³⁹ They did not realise that twenty years is inadequate in assessing the highly variable rainfall pattern of Central Australia. According to Ford,⁴⁰ in 1926 they and their stock were forced to their limits when summer rains failed to materialise. Ford paints a picture of despair as the previously welcoming land dries out and stock begin to die and as hopes for the future turn to dust.

From such disasters, however, is forged the mythic stoicism of the outback. In outback mythology, the outcomes generally remain at the level of rather vague admiration and worthy stoicism, the value of which is taken to be self-evident. More detail, however, is required to tease out the specific resonances of such elements of frontier mythology today. In the Chalmers case, rain finally came in March, when the country flooded and brought forth an 'unbelievable carpet of vitality and fertility' where stock had been dying their thousands.⁴¹ The Chalmers sheep flourished and the region 'had become a land flowing with milk and honey, and the pastoral scene breathed serenity, prosperity and contentment' as 'once again the remarkable recuperative powers of the country had been proved'.⁴² This experience provided the Chalmers with a steep learning curve about Central Australia, but it also had a more significant effect. As noted above, Ford is evidently told of another observation, that the country can recuperate and bloom, when it is apparently ruined, and the pastoralists labour and commitment destroyed with it. From this perspective, for those who are there to see it, the country shows its true nature, its true productivity. This is a productivity that is felt or known for those who have seen the cycles and seen their families and stations survive; there to see for those who wait, for those who persist and place their faith in the land.

In pastoral historical memory, experiences such as the Chalmers etch the families into the land. They carve out a place for themselves through suffering, and in turn the experience is carried by them and their heirs. In pastoral culture, those who pass through such events in Central Australia embody the events and carry them within their person. Indeed, among pastoralists the shared embodiment of these experiences is an important part of collective identity and memory, marking them off from others whom they assume to have no understanding of Central Australia due to lack of presence. It is a culture of faith that persists strongly to this day. This was exemplified by pastoralist Bernie Kilgariff's assertion to a 1996 Landcare meeting that 'we [pastoralists] know the good of Central Australia'. The 'good' appeals to shared understandings and meanings

³⁹ Ford, *Beyond the Furthest Fences*, aide.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

about the nature of the land between pastoralists and to the value of their occupation of it. It is a singular 'good', one that has meaning only within the context of pastoralism, yet which underpins a presumption in favour of a universal pastoral landscape. It is a concept that is perhaps nostalgic in form, but it is central to the fabric and maintenance of the pastoral landscape for it expresses both a domestication of the land according to powerful notions of landscape progression⁴³ and reciprocity between land and pastoralist.

Knowing the land also develops through labour. In pastoral culture, the labour on a station creates a geography that is an amalgam of the land and of those who labour; a geography of work that is specific to those who created it. A great familiarity is generated in the course of developing and working a station, and this is portrayed in the pastoralist histories. In her autobiographical account of establishing a station in the Tanami Desert, Marie Mahood,⁴⁴ describes her husband's labours. In setting up the station, Joe Mahood travels continuously over its 1620 square kilometres, determining the best locations for the bores, yards and other facilities. Successfully determining the best location of such infrastructure required observation of pasture and water resources, and their relationship to landforms and routes around the station. In concert with these tasks is a sense of how the station is to function as a whole. The station is the outcome of the merging of the physical makeup of the land, and of the pastoral ideals and plans that are both imposed upon the land and shaped by the encounter with it. In the process the land is marked by the pastoralists' efforts, and, while in cattle culture land retains its enormity and separateness from the human realm, it is nonetheless transformed to a personalised and pastoral landscape. Due to the effort involved in starting the station, Mongrel Downs became a home for the Mahoods 'as no other place had ever been because the challenges and responsibilities were so much greater'.⁴⁵ Knowledge of the land is also knowledge of oneself.

The relationship of the pastoral families with the land is not only one of inscription of themselves and of meaning onto the land. In the pastoral histories, the land also shapes and works its way into the pastoralists, shaping their bodies, actions and ways of thinking. For example, Joe Mahood gave 'eight years of his life to establishing Mongrel Downs' and Rosemary Coppock, recalling her days on a station she and her husband began, writes of how they 'used up muscle, sweat and tears'.⁴⁶ Pastoralists are portrayed as giving themselves to the land and to an unspecified higher goal. In these histories, this is a selfless process of forging a landscape for the social good, not the realisation of personal ambitions.

⁴³ Anderson, 'A Walk on the Wild Side: a Critical Geography of Domestication'.

⁴⁴ Mahood, *Icing on the Damper*.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Coppock, *Central Australian Cattle Station Woman*; Mahood, *Icing on the Damper*.

Why this might be a worthy activity is not asked; the teleology of landscape is assumed in pastoral culture.

The permeability of land and people that underlies much of these pastoral accounts is a central part of the pastoral relationship to land. This relationship is founded on establishing presence in the landscape through work or observation. This is a presence defined as much by the presence of the land within pastoralists as the presence of the pastoralist in the land. This presence is articulated through remembering such that memory is at once histories and geographies of self, family and pastoral community. Memory and landscape constitute each other and the remembered self is present at all times. Indeed without the remembered self, or the presence of those pastoralists who have succeeded and built upon previous labour, there is no meaning in the land. Such are the silent foundations of present day pastoralist objections to transfer of pastoral land to Aboriginal landowners or national parks.

Conclusion

One of the questions raised by these accounts is whether the relationship between settler pastoralists and land is comparable to that of Aboriginal people. On the face of it pastoral relationships based on a sense of ancestral origins and on permeability between land and people appear similar to Aboriginal relationships to land. This topic requires more elaboration than possible within the task tackled here. Suffice here to say that there appear to be some fundamental differences, in particular that the pastoral sense of connection appears to be a process of *becoming* connected, whereas for Aboriginal people it is always a question of being. Moreover, pastoral relationships, based as they are in labour and reproduction, may be recreated in different places. Aboriginal relationships, though far from static, are not so readily transported and recreated.

This chapter has focused on selected elements of pastoral memory and histories. I have sought to lay out those elements that illustrate pastoralists' conceptions of landscape evolution in Central Australia, and which validate their habitation and land use. Although the histories present these elements as self evident in their worth, their underlying strength derives from two broader structural features of the narratives.

One pertains to Raymond Williams's concept of the 'knowable community'⁴⁷. This is a 'strategy in discourse'⁴⁸ through which value is bestowed on certain and powerful sections of society, such that those sections, their members, their activities and their values stand as definitive of society as a whole. The 'knowable community', as presented in any one narrative is a community 'wholly known, within the essential terms' of the narrative, yet as an 'actual community [it is]

⁴⁷ Williams, *The Country and the City*.

⁴⁸ O'Connor, *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics*.

very precisely selective'.⁴⁹ The appearance of wholeness emplaced and built in emptiness, as we see in pastoral histories, conceals selectivity and fragmentation. In addition, the land itself is drawn into the pastoral 'knowable community' as its capacities and variations are woven into pastoral concepts of productivity, persistence and faith that naturalise the pastoral presence. The pastoral mode of knowing the land becomes *the* 'good of Central Australia'.

The second structuring feature is further buried within the stories told. This is a feature alluded to at points in the text, the mythic landscape progressions from wilderness to cultivated garden. In times of European expansionism these idealised and strongly hierarchical geographies were mapped onto the globe, positioning Europe as civilised and the colonies as wilderness. By the late 19th century such geographies came to be mapped in nationalist terms onto European colonies.⁵⁰ As European nations expanded their empires, these ancient ideals 'functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World'.⁵¹

The wilderness landscape is essentially unformed, chaotic, innocent and uninhabited. Classically, the garden is a step towards culture. It is the crucible of domestic life and the active transformation of the earth for human ends, and is a place of labour within nature's cycles. In classical mythology, it is superseded by the city, the pinnacle of culture, itself to be returned to wilderness as it degenerates. By the colonising period, however, the garden had become an endpoint in itself as the classical cycle of landscape destruction and creation was replaced by a linear progression from wilderness to the recovery of the garden from the Fall.⁵² In relation to colonising practices, recovering the garden landscape involved emptying the landscape of indigenes and establishing agriculture and reciprocal relations with land.

In their representations of the construction of Central Australia, the pastoral histories replicate the creation of the garden from an empty wilderness. Upon these potent ideals they build a version of yeoman agrarianism that includes reciprocal relationships between settler and land in territory unmodified by the plough. Pastoralists tell a story of closing the frontier, but one that freezes the landscape just after closure, does not countenance change and celebrates frontier activities. They tell of a process of settlement but rather than seeing this as something that can evolve and go on, pastoral settlement brings closure. Although pastoralists bring and carry out change, they see this as teleological process; the pastoral landscape is an endpoint. That their changes and their labour, are themselves part of broader social processes that vary regionally, nationally, globally and in time, is disavowed. History ends with them. In pastoral histories

⁴⁹ Williams, *The Country and the City*.

⁵⁰ Cosgrove, 'Habitable Earth: Wilderness, Empire and Race in America'.

⁵¹ Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative'.

⁵² *ibid.*

and memory, all value, as a 'general... condition',⁵³ is to be found in the past. Even as the frontier is ended in these histories, it is made available for retelling as a model of society and landscape for today.

In these retrospective responses to change, pastoralists derive their morality from the very colonising structures that are under challenge. They look to a simplified past for guidance, rather than fully responding to the complexities of the present. They draw on a highly selective recollection of the past that is not simply an outcome of colonialism but is constructed from the very mythical foundations that have informed, driven and justified non-indigenous settlement of Australia and the dispossession of indigenous people. These histories portray their protagonists one-dimensionally as deserving 'battlers'. Until more complex pasts are admitted within the dominant 'whitefella' culture of the NT, however, these histories simply give further voice to a group that still wields considerable political and cultural power.

⁵³ Williams, *The Country and the City*.

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5. Water as collaborator

Jay Arthur

It used to be a dry country out there in years gone by, but bores have changed all of it to white man's land, carrying many sheep.¹

The yarn flowed as sluggishly as his river, with anabranches and deep waterholes of reminiscences and irrelevant snags and sandspits to check its course.²

Whenever I hear of an election, I feel a dam coming on.³

This chapter is mediated through three landscapes.

The view from Geary's Gap

Lake George is a large natural lake to the north of Canberra. Its indigenous name is *Weereewa*. The Federal Highway connecting Canberra to the Hume Freeway to Sydney runs along its western shore. As I drive from Canberra to Sydney, about half-an-hour from home the highway rises up the small elevation of Geary's Gap, the break in the line of hills that mark that western edge of the Lake. Just before the car tops the rise, I always think 'How much water will there be in the Lake?' The view may be of water that's almost lapping the edge of the highway. At other times there is an expanse of bleached paddock, with sheep grazing and fencelines stretching across to a mirage on the far side – in fact not a mirage but water on the Bungendore side of the lake. Very often I see a fenceline, which runs from making a line in the waving grass to making a gradually diminishing line in the blue-grey water.

These changes in water level in Lake George have caught the settler imagination – despite the fact that such changes are a common feature of many Australian water bodies. Since European occupation the Lake has dried up at least three times and at other periods a pleasure-steamer took Sydney tourists on excursions over the Lake. Fantastic ideas have accounted for the changes in water level: it is related to the depth of a lake in New Zealand or balances the level of the Blue Lake at Mt Gambier. When Lake Burley Griffin was formed by the damming of the Molonglo River in Canberra, some locals expressed a fear that the new lake would 'do a Lake George' and disappear. In fact, its depth is a response to rainfall in its catchments.

¹ *Western Champion*, 31 August 1897, p. 3, column 3.

² Farwell, *The Outside Track*, p. 93.

³ Kelly, Hon C. R. 'Bert' Kelly, CMG, Minister for Public Works, 1967–68.

The view to the south of Canberra Airport

Flying to Melbourne from Canberra the plane takes to off the north. As it gains height, it turns west and from the left-hand side there's a view across the hobbyfarms and 'twelve acre block' country. The morning sun catches hundreds of farm dams, shining like coins scattered across a worn carpet. It is such an overwhelming pattern of water redistribution that one cannot help thinking about how water once moved across this landscape before the building of these multitudinous dams – each now making its offer of evaporated water to the sky. There are marks of the old hydrology – creeks, some of them dry, Lake George, the Molonglo River – but the old patterns are not visible to me as they might be to a hydrologist, geologist or geographer. Some of the creeks are probably new – formed from sheepwalks – and I cannot easily trace the marks of drained swamps or old rivercourses.

The child's drawing – the haunting landscape

The third landscape is not one I have seen myself, but seen through the eyes of someone who knew it. I saw it in 1999 in a collection of a children's coloured pencil drawings of contemporary Central Australian cattle station life and the image continues to haunt me.

In the drawing, the viewer looks across the surface of a water tank full to overflowing. Beyond the tank is a dead tree and beside the tree a cow, (her station brand drawn large and clear), which has just finished drinking from a trough. Her head is turned towards the viewer and water drips from her mouth. The water in the trough comes from the pipe leading from the tank; on the left of that is the windmill, with its feeder pipe spilling water into the tank. On the right, water runs from the overflow pipe onto the ground, where a small circle of deep green grass has formed. Otherwise the red earth is completely bare. The sky is cloudless. The colours are blue, red, metallic grey and brown, with one touch of dark green.

There are only two living things in the picture – the cow and the circle of grass.

The windmill is very carefully drawn, with its pattern of struts and the name *Southern Cross* on the vane. The mechanics of the water-machinery – the connections between the various parts – are also carefully presented.

The continuing conversation

These three landscapes are presented as part of my obsessive concern with the non-indigenous relation to water in the Australian landscape. In my previous work,⁴ I looked at the way in which language operates in this interaction. I

⁴ In various articles but at most length in my doctoral thesis: 'Writing Home: a lexical cartography of twentieth-century Australia', University of Canberra 1999.

noted that terms such as *lake* and *river* are given definitions by Australian dictionaries which fit European, not Australian, waterbodies – these definitions reflecting the discrepancy in the settler understanding of this place. I analysed the discourse surrounding drought – whereby drought, a common, expected, normal, inevitable part of the Australian climatic cycle is located with vocabularies of war, disease, disaster and death.

In this chapter, I am turning to visual images – the three landscapes – to continue this conversation.

Lake George

Looking at Lake George from Geary's Gap is like looking at a double-exposed photograph. Is it a paddock or a lake? Is it pastoral Australia or a pre-occupation landscape? The fence line marks paddocks, sheep, pastoralism on the land edging the highway. But pastoralism is filling a space that is simultaneously filled with a natural lake – an aquatic environment. The borders between the two environments are blurred, confused. They change so that water flows into the photograph of the paddock, leaving only the line of the fence as a reminder of the other way of reading the landscape. The pre- and post-occupation landscapes merge – or are they laid one on the other, incompatibly?

The drawing

In the drawing, the relation between land and water is perfectly clear. The water is contained in a script of pipes, tanks and troughs. The only slight blurring occurs where water drips from the overflow pipe, where the excess of the colonised water is allowed to move back into the indigenous landscape. The tree is dead, there is no vegetation except the grass. The pre-occupation world is absent or dead, except for the patch of (indigenous?) grass. The two living things, the cow and the grass, are both dependent on the water provided by the windmill.

Clarifying the ambiguous landscape

In pre-occupation Australia, the boundaries between land and water are dynamic. Rivers appear above ground and then disappear. They vary greatly in their widths. Anabranches, billabongs, are left as evidence of this changing pattern. *Chains of ponds*, a typical pre-occupation creek system, disrupts the European concept of a continuing watercourse. Wetlands make an indistinct border. A *floodout* is one way a river moves from being water to being land. *Banker*, invented very early in the occupation, is an Australian English term used to describe an event uncommon in English rivers but very common in Australian rivers – a river flooded to its bank. In pre-occupation Australia, the edges of 'land' as opposed to 'water' or 'water' to 'land', are ambiguous.

This ambiguity is removed in the non-indigenous landscape. Here there is a clear distinction between land and water. Water is controlled, regulated, so that the amount remains more constant and the movement of water is as even as possible. Chains of waterholes become a continuous creek. Water is also visible – not underground, or blurred by swamp. If it is underground, it is contained in a pipe. Water is dammed and piped – held in a trough, tank, reservoir. It is civilised.

Water in its pre- and post-occupation forms is described, ironically, with many of the same kinds of terms that were used until the last 50 years of Aboriginal people and their culture by the occupying culture. *Unregulated* water is either irrational and ‘half-formed’ or primeval and magnificent – in either case not part of the occupying world. *Regulated* water is tamed, domesticated, fruitful, predictable, rational – or debased and polluted.⁵

The flight over the landscape south of Canberra displays a civilised hydrography. Hundreds of thousands of small dams, like water-paddocks, clearly show where the water is. The swamps and chains of ponds are few. This is the occupied landscape, where the world has settled into the new culture. In the view from Geary’s Gap, the new and old cultures are simultaneously present – which may be why settlers have found the place so troubling.

In the child’s drawing, the change from one landscape to the other is taking place in front of your eyes. Its power lies in its (implicit) violence. All life in this picture is dependent on the introduced water. At the same time, the pre-occupation landscape is still evidenced, in the dead tree and the bare earth. The bodies are still there. Occupation is still recent; this is a frontier picture.

Water as collaborator

Before the advent of bores and the access to artesian and sub-artesian water, the occupiers’ relation to the landscape was similar to that of the indigenous population, but without their cultural knowledge. They were dependent on knowledge borrowed from the indigenous people, but still subject to wandering storms and intermittent rivers. But with the development of bores, water could take them and their cattle and sheep into country they could never settle before, and allow them to remain. The new status of this relation is evidenced in the invention of the word *piosphere*, to describe the environment created around a watering point.

It is this space, a piosphere, which is rendered so acutely in the child’s drawing of the windmill and the water tank; a frontier post in an occupied country, where the water holds the frontier against the shifting, ambiguous and troubling indigenous space.

⁵ See my doctoral thesis, especially Chapter 13: ‘A Tale of Two Rivers’.

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6. You call it desert – we used to live there

Pat Lowe

When I first went to the desert with people who come from there, we travelled by car and on foot to some very out of the way places. They had names, but were not to be found on kartiya (whitefella) maps, even under a kartiya name. Sometimes I found myself wondering whether I was the first white person to have set foot in some of these places. I had, after all, been brought up in England in the days when much of the map of the world was coloured red, and when British people were proud of the Empire. I read books such as *King Solomon's Mines*. I learnt about the great explorers of Africa: Livingstone and Burton were among my heroes. My heart swelled with pride at the age of 12 when, as I sat in the rain awaiting the Queen's coronation parade, it was announced over the loudspeakers that a British team had conquered Everest. No one mentioned that they could not have got anywhere near the summit without massive support from the local Nepalese. I thought Hilary and Tensing were both Englishmen.

Of course, digging for water in the middle of a desert plain does not cut quite the same dash as stepping onto the summit of the world's highest mountain, but I had inherited the cultural sense that to be the first white person, especially if you were of British origin, to stand anywhere is somehow significant. The Great Sandy Desert was my frontier.

But one person's frontier is another person's home. At the same time that I was experiencing the newness of the desert, a country without settlement or, nowadays, human habitation of any kind for hundreds of square miles, I was learning how differently the country appeared to the people who grew up there. In this landscape, regarded by some as so inimical to human settlement as to be a suitable receptacle for the world's radioactive waste, they were profoundly at home: indeed, far more at home in the sandhills than they were in Fitzroy Crossing, where they had spent the past thirty or forty years. Not only is Fitzroy Crossing a town with kartiya rules and expectations, but also it lies within the country of the riverside Bunuba people, where the desert people who now live there remain forever outsiders.

At first, the desert appeared to me beautiful but undifferentiated. I saw regular, long red sandhills and swales clad in spinifex, wattle and small trees. Only as I picked up some of the vocabulary of the Walmajarri people did I begin to distinguish one area from another, and start to perceive pattern instead of randomness. I learnt that one place where we used to go hunting fairly regularly was a 'tinyjilwarnti' – characterised by claypans and large numbers of *Eucalyptus*

victrix. Another, to me similar, eucalypt called a yarun grew on some sandhills in stands known as kurrmalyi. A third, whose pure white bark people cut to use as disposable utensils, tended to grow in ones and twos and was called nyumpurl. Other trees that once I would have described as 'stunted' – in other words, inferior as measured against a European yardstick of height, as if there were tall, non-stunted specimens to be found somewhere else – gradually became transformed into perfectly adapted hakea and grevillea, with flowers that provide welcome mouthfuls of nectar, their curved trunks the matrix from which people draw forth pairs of boomerangs.

Of course, any botanist would have made these simple distinctions at once, without having to go through a cross-cultural learning process. But the botanist would very likely have been just as naive or blind as I was when it came to the true nature of sandhills. I challenge anyone who comes to the desert for the first time to distinguish between a jilji and a jitpari, a kurrkuminti and a larralarra: terms describing sandhill formations for which English has no words.

But words are not the only means by which different perceptions of the desert are expressed. Desert art is another. In her book, *Seeking the Centre*, Roslynn Haynes has discussed the emptiness of 19th century paintings of the desert: it is a landscape of skulls, the starvation desert of Lasseter, Burke and Wills. Today that perception is changing, artists are seeing the desert as beautiful, but more for its sweeping vistas of sameness than for its variety or its detail.

In 1996, when preparing their Native Title claim and struggling with the insuperable communication gap between themselves and the Native Title Tribunal, a group of Walmajarri people decided to present their claim visually, through a painting. About seventy artists and other claimants collaborated on a huge work, measuring eight by ten metres, depicting their country. Each artist worked on his or her own area or, under direction, on that of a non-artist claimant. The result is a vast map.

Compare this with an ordnance survey map of the same area. Here indeed is terra nullius: the empty imagination of strangers.

This blindness is not confined to the desert. Let me quote three comments about the pindan savanna country of the West Kimberley region. The first comes from a pastoralist: 'That land's only good for nuclear testing or growing cotton,' he said. Note the inadvertent equation of two environmentally disastrous uses of land.

The second comment was made by a Federal Opposition spokesman on the environment. I met him to discuss a proposal to clear 250 000 hectares of the natural pindan bush for cotton production. He looked at me quizzically. 'What do you see as the problem?' he asked. 'There's not much there, is there?'

The third is one of the cotton proponents. He is on record as saying, of the pindan bush where I go hunting and bushwalking and rejoicing in the abundance of nature every weekend, 'It's literally dead.' Dead, this country of hugely varied flora, teeming with wildlife, its air filled with birds and insects? The same country that the Karajarri people plead for so eloquently, the country that supported them and several other language groups for countless thousands of years?

How can three men of presumably reasonable intelligence get it so wrong? From where do they inherit their selective blindness?

Whether we were born in Europe or Australia, we kartiya share European archetypes, as Jay Arthur has shown so effectively through her analysis of the concepts underlying the words we use. Our ideals of nature include striking features of landscape: mountains and hills, flowing rivers, tall trees, perhaps even hedgerows. The pindan has none of these. It is flat and densely vegetated, though burnt fairly regularly. For people used to navigating by hills and valleys, it is easy to get lost in. Non-Aboriginal people, apart from pastoralists, seldom venture into it. They drive past on their way to the next town, and most never see beyond the dead wattle and the cockroach bushes near the roadside. Proposals to clear many thousands of hectares of it to grow cotton meet with barely a murmur. The qualities of the pindan are subtle, and must be lived with, learnt and understood. They reveal themselves gradually, to those who make an effort to find them. And they are known intimately by the people who truly belong there.

A 'frontier' is culturally determined. It is a concept inextricable from colonial expansionism and conquest. One never has a frontier in one's own country. It is always in someone else's country. And the other person is part of the country still to be conquered. This may seem odd to people who consider the whole of Australia their country, and even that of several generations of ancestors. But Australia, to its indigenous inhabitants, is not one country but many. And much of it is still in the process of being colonised. Large areas of it are not yet 'tamed'. And, while the rest of Australia is talking about reconciliation, the people in northern Australia are still being dispossessed.

A few years ago, a middle-aged Australian couple, driving a new four-wheel drive car, well-equipped and provisioned with food and water, broke down on a desert track. Unable to get their car started, they decided to wait for rescue. They waited for two weeks. They said afterwards that they had spent the entire two weeks sitting in their car. After a number of days of this, with no sign of rescue, they wrote their wills. Somewhat belatedly, their daughter reported them missing, a rescue party went out, and they were found. This is in country that, not so long ago, was inhabited by people who knew nothing of cars, who walked confidently from waterhole to waterhole with no more equipment than they could carry in their hands and on their heads.

I once broke down in the desert with Jimmy Pike and two dogs. We spent a day-and-a-half trying to get our car started again, but failed. After lunch on the second day, Jimmy announced that we would have to walk. Carrying the rifle and a small esky of water we set off. Where I would have had to retrace our journey along the seismic lines, Jimmy cut across country, heading as the crow flies, straight towards our camp, thereby saving us hours of foot-slogging. Even so, the journey took all afternoon and most of the night: we reached camp shortly before dawn. On the way we killed and cooked a couple of small goannas to eat and set fire to the spinifex to warm ourselves. I had no fear, because I was in the competent hands of someone who knew the country intimately and was at home there. Even if we had broken down two hundred kilometres away, I have no doubt we would have got back safely, though it would have taken a little longer.

On another occasion, I lost a key. We had driven to a particular spot, parked the car, and gone hunting on foot. After a few hours of following tracks wherever they led, we headed back to the car. When we got there, I felt in my pocket: no key. I remembered taking a packet of dried fruit out of my pocket somewhere in the course of our walk, and supposed I had pulled the key out with it. Jimmy and I looked at one another. My dismay was greater than his. 'Well,' he said, 'you'll just have to follow your tracks back and find it.' I pleaded, he relented, and we set off in a straight line back across the sandhills, Jimmy leading, me following. No need to retrace our tortuous tracks. After some time, with a slight jerk of the head and a nonchalance all his own, Jimmy indicated a spot on the ground. 'There's your key,' he said. And there it was: a single car key lying on the red sand where it had fallen.

I have just come back from a two-week journey into the Great Sandy Desert with 20 traditional owners. We were well equipped with modern vehicles and communication systems. Even so, it is hard travelling. The seismic lines are covered with several years of regrowth and, when you approach the waterholes, you make your own tracks. For hours you bump over the spinifex in the flat, then hurl your vehicle up sandhills, relying on your momentum to carry you over the humps to the crest, sometimes becoming airborne on the other side. It is hot, dry; the only water is what you carry, or what you dig. It is the sort of journey for which, if you were a tour operator, you would have an age limit and require your passengers to obtain medical clearance. Yet most of our passengers were in their sixties, seventies and eighties, suffering from all manner of ailments: diabetes, heart disease, obesity, blindness. At night they slept in their swags on the sand and got bitten by centipedes. They lived largely on tins of corned beef and kippers, with an occasional treat of goanna or feral cat. Yet the only complaint we heard from those old people was when we ran out of milk for the Weetbix. And several of them said spontaneously: 'We don't get sick out here; we only get sick in town.'

People found and dug out waterholes they hadn't seen in 45 years or more. They identified over 150 plants and, where relevant, described their uses.

These are the differences between being at the frontier and being at home.

But there were a few younger people on the trip, children and grandchildren of the happy older people, who were experiencing the desert for the first time. They complained of the heat and the bumps. They were unfamiliar with the plant life. They said they would not be able to find the waterholes again, by memory, the way the older people had done. They no longer understand their country in the way their parents or grandparents did. They attend kartiya schools and learn kartiya concepts. They learn much that is new, but in doing so they unlearn much that is not only old, but priceless.

Once, Jimmy and I were talking to a class of school children in Fitzroy Crossing. I showed them our book, *Jilji*¹, the title of which means 'sandhill'. It is a book about Walmajarri people's country in the Great Sandy Desert, which consists almost entirely of jilji: these long, regular sandhills stretching sometimes for hundreds of kilometres across the landscape. Expecting most people in the class to know, I asked, 'What does jilji mean?' No one answered. 'Are there any Walmajarri people here?' I asked. A forest of hands flew up. 'You should be able to tell us: what is a jilji?' Not one child knew. All had been brought up as exiles in Fitzroy Crossing and had attended kartiya schools. None had ever seen a jilji, let alone walked around the waterholes in their own country. How many, when they grow up, will be able to find a key left forgotten on the sand? In a single generation, the knowledge of countless former generations will be lost. It still exists, but it is fading from the world's screen and there is no way of retaining more than a smattering of it. The Walmajarri children's map of the desert has diminished from the big painting to the ordnance survey map. The home of their parents and grandparents is becoming for them, as it has always been for us, the unknown frontier.

¹ Pat Lowe and Jimmy Pike, 1990, *Jilji*, Magabala Books, Broome.

References

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