

## Places Not Forgotten

### Memories and testimonies:

I spend much of my time in marginal, dry-land farming country in the southern Flinders Ranges in South Australia, a place of diminishing population, sparse landscapes and resilient social memory. Local communities here are mainly parochial and mono-cultural, tempered in some parts by a strong element of Irish-Catholic conviviality that welcomes outsiders, providing they have something interesting to say and are willing to make themselves useful. (1) It's a place that reveals itself only over time, as the stories, names and explanations for particular places and people become gradually apparent. There's an abundance of unwritten local knowledge revealing, for example, names to define the baffling maze of unsigned dirt roads and all of the paddocks, houses, ruins and other landmarks they connect to. It's a place where there's a lot going on beneath the surface, a place where the connection of people to country is constantly being restated and defined in local vernacular.

In *Craft for a Dry Lake*, artist and writer Kim Mahood tells of how, as a child growing up on a remote cattle station in the Tanamai Desert, she learned the value of talk. People, she says, 'talked themselves into the country.' (2) This way of talking resonates in my own sense of particular country. I can recite a litany of good examples:

The Imperial Hotel in Orroroo burnt to the ground in 1969 and was never rebuilt. In spite of this, local drinkers still refer to the existing Commercial Hotel (up the road from where the Imperial used to stand) as 'the middle pub', even though there are now only two pubs in the town. In a strange way, and without any explicit reference, the Imperial lives on in local consciousness.

The Orroroo Railway Goods Shed, a huge stone building constructed in 1882, was unceremoniously demolished in 1998 by South Australian Cooperative Bulk Handling in order that large wheat trucks might be able to park a bit closer to the adjacent silos. A spirited local campaign failed to prevent the demolition. A couple of years later Mrs Joan Ellery, a member of the local heritage group, commissioned retired plumber Geoff O'Loughlan to make her a letterbox in the form of a small replica of the Goods Shed building. The letterbox stands as testimony not just to a lost landmark, but also to the willingness of local people to defend and commemorate their heritage. (With similar motivation, Mrs Ellery also instigated the recent erection of a monument commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Walloway Railway Disaster, a fatal, head-on collision involving two steam locomotives, a few kilometres north of Orroroo.) (3)

In a remote paddock some 15 kilometres south of Orroroo, an elegant pencil pine stands beside the front door of one of the many crumbling stone ruins that are scattered across this region. Planted by the late Paddy McNamara, the pencil pine works to create a kind of classic picturesque vista. An old bachelor farmer, Paddy is now long gone, leaving

only a few distant memories and an empty building, but his vista lives on. (I attempt to memorialise Paddy's vista in a drawing called *Scenic Point*, a kind of tragi-comic pastoral landscape.) (4)

Places in this district are often named to signify a person or event long gone. I think of a paddock sold to a neighbouring farmer by the aforementioned Paddy McNamara at some time in the 1930s. Although this bit of land has been owned in the same family name for almost seventy years, it's still known locally as 'Paddy Mac's'. There's another small parcel of land a bit further south known as 'Bully Acre', allegedly in reference to an over-the-fence conversation between neighbouring farmers in some bygone era when 'bully acre' was an intelligible reference to a paddock capable of producing an exceptionally good crop of wheat.

Here's another one: Down along a walking trail at the nearby Pekina Creek, a sign attracts visitors to the otherwise obscure site of a sentimental poem scratched into the rock face by D. Macdonald, a young man departing the town in 1896 to seek his fortune in America. Embellished with Victorian aphorisms, the poem is an oddly moving testimony to a place and people that the writer knows he will probably never see again. Particular reference is made to old friends already deceased, and the writer's intention of meeting these dear ones in the 'place beyond, when all wanderings cease'.

Of course, most of the people that I know in this farming country that I'm talking of eschew such sentimental expression. Nevertheless, while they might often come across as brutally unsentimental and undemonstrative, I've known some of them in candid and less guarded moments to voice expressions of deep emotional attachment to the places where they live and work, sometimes even employing spiritual or metaphysical terms to describe their feelings. Similarly, I'm thinking now of Ivan H., an otherwise generally undemonstrative, retired carter and road builder who I interviewed in another South Australian country town, telling how a particular section of stone wall out in his garage always makes him think of his late brother who built it. 'You might think this is weak, but sometimes I sense a presence, like I can even talk with him when I'm in this part of the building.' (7)

My point in relating all of the above is to suggest that most of us carry around in our heads (or our hearts) memories and maps of special places – places to which we have, or at least once had, a profound attachment. In his book *Returning to Nothing – the meaning of lost places*, historian Peter Read observes:

For every lost town like Leigh Creek in South Australia (demolished to enlarge a coal mine) there are a hundred lost and forgotten communities of tumbledown houses, overgrown camp sites, broken bricks, disused axe-grinding grooves, foundations of Aboriginal mission stations, apricot and plum trees in the midst of paddocks, wild irises at abandoned railway sidings, gold mines, crossroads, river crossings, and sailing-ship ports. Some of the inhabitants probably left each of these places actually or metaphorically 'weeping and becoming unemployed'. (5)

These places are the focal point for profound claims of attachment to place made by many non-indigenous Australians. I want to talk more about these claims, and look too at the complex ways in which they sit alongside co-existing indigenous claims. In doing so, I am seeking to demonstrate the veracity of Read's claim that all of us are 'partisans telling parallel narratives'(6), and suggesting that we can all make legitimate claims on these places that we're connected to.

#### Staking a claim on complex territory:

I've come to believe that real connection with country is something that we develop through time spent in a particular place (although there's no simple prescription for the amount of time it takes to develop the kind of connection I'm referring to), or even at some physical remove from a place that we still occupy in our memories. I'm not convinced by claims made on country simply on the basis of birthright, especially when such claims deny the validity of all others. I think now that one earns this right to make claims on a place, and that our position is often not simple or easy.

In writing of her travels back into the country of her childhood, Kim Mahood describes the paradoxical pull and challenge of personal heartland:

Crossing the border back into the Territory, my childhood rushes to meet me... I begin to feel something in my bones and nerves and viscera. I would not describe it as an emotion. It is more like a chemical reaction, as if a certain light and temperature and dryness triggers a series of physical and nervous realignments. I stop the car, get out and walk a little distance away from the road. My pulse rate is up, everything takes on a hallucinatory clarity... The land here is stronger than the people. Once it has staked its claim, it does not relinquish it.

And, later:

Now, here, every idea I have ever had seems irrelevant... The stories I have told to city friends, that have given my life a glamorous and exotic edge, seem like flimsy posturing. What is real is the discomfort, the blank space, the awkwardness, the recognition that one earns the right to a relationship through time spent with people and country, and that in recent times I have not spent that time.

It might be easy to imagine that for earlier generations characteristically less mobile, less geographically dislocated than my own, things were probably more simply defined. But I'm not so sure. I'm thinking, for example, of my 97 year-old grandmother. She has lived all her life within an area of less than twenty kilometres radius, but the small farm that she lived on for over fifty years is long sold off and changed beyond recognition. On one level, it's still her place, but it's not one that she can go back to. Her memories and continuing possession of this substantial part of her life are now vested in the various things that she managed to bring with her when she retired off the farm and moved into town – pieces of good furniture, transplanted rose bushes, the crockery that she's eaten off ever since her marriage in 1929.

I'm thinking also of Laurie Pace, a retired underground miner now working as an artist in Broken Hill. All through his mining years he'd bring home lumps of various minerals, developing a collection of these out in his back shed. Now, he crushes these minerals into powders of various colours and uses these to make pictures of the mine environment that he worked in and portraits of the people he worked with. Broken Hill is Laurie Pace's town, and his work as an artist claims the mines as his too, even though the ongoing closure and disappearance of these mines is utterly beyond his control.

At a greater remove from the place to which he is still strongly attached is Tom D., a retired doctor living in Adelaide with strong feelings for Burra, the country town in which he grew up. He shows a tablecloth belonging to a late aunt that he was close to as a child. A classic relic of life around the time of the First World War, the cloth is covered with embroidery that traces the signatures of his aunt's friends and family, some of whom went off to war and never returned. Tom D. recognises most of these names as local families that he grew up with. The embroidered cloth is, for him, a kind of talisman that connects him with a life that might otherwise have now slipped beyond reach. (8)

Throughout much of regional Australia (at least that large arid or semi-arid portion west of the Great Divide) communities and individuals fight an uphill battle to maintain their claims on particular country. There are forever fewer people, less time, less resources, less social continuity. Things fall over and subside into the earth – private and public buildings, gardens and orchards, fences and signposts, playing fields and graveyards. Frequently, there's no one to maintain, repair or rebuild these places. Some places hang on at the edge of social memory, maintained only by occasional gestures and spasmodic references. I think this is why I'm always so impressed by random, effusive gestures like Joan Ellery's aforementioned letterbox, or a nearby local farmer's spontaneous creation of a roadside icon to celebrate a piece of local folklore. (See accompanying image from Magnetic Hill, a peculiar, remote place where geography and perspective combine to make cars seemingly defy gravity and roll up-hill.) These gestures occur as isolated acts of resistance in the face of widespread cultural erosion. Across Australia, it's not just Aboriginal ceremonial grounds that have been forgotten, that have lost their currency and meaning...

#### Sharing the high (moral) ground:

I'm increasingly uncomfortable with popular polarisations of indigenous and non-indigenous cultural heritage and identity. I think there is far more common ground than is generally recognised, and potential for a more constructive discourse that recognises this. In particular, I want a discourse that seeks to reconcile co-existing claims of attachment to country, that allows a respectful listening and understanding of complex, multi-layered stories from diverse stakeholders. I'm respectful of Aboriginal heritage and supportive of many Aboriginal claims for land and recognition, but I don't believe that this respect obliges me to denigrate non-Aboriginal heritage. I don't believe the old myth that the cultural legacy of all white Australians is a profound disconnection from this country that we came to occupy relatively recently. As suggested above, I've seen much evidence to demonstrate otherwise.

Let me present just one example of a sadly one-dimensional cultural discourse: Having read the profoundly moving story of Daryl Tonkin, a white, small-scale saw-miller and the instigator and supporter of an entire Aboriginal community at a place called Jackson's Track in western Gippsland in the 1940s and '50s, I'm disappointed when Bunjilaka, the Aboriginal gallery at the new Melbourne Museum, presents various depictions and references to life at Jackson's Track with no mention whatsoever of the complex structure and culture of that community and the country in which it was based. Why is there an apparent political filtering of this story, prohibiting our appreciation of its full richness? (9) I know that the great bulk of published Australian history has told the achievements and tragedies of white Australia with only limited, dismissive reference to indigenous people and cultures, but I don't think it does us any good to replicate this myopia (even from the reverse ethno-centric position) in our contemporary historical endeavours.

For similar reasons, I take issue with any claim that only in the work of Aboriginal artists can we find deeply felt or spiritually infused depictions of Australian landscape, or that Aboriginal artists have a moral authority that automatically diminishes the authority of work by anyone else. I know from personal experience and from what I've learnt from others (indigenous and non-indigenous) that profound attachment or commitment to a place isn't necessarily premised around several millenniums of ancestral association. I know that powerful understandings and interpretations of a place can come from all sorts of positions, made manifest by all manner of people with all kinds of cultural heritage.

I want to celebrate the work of an artist like Ian Abdulla as a powerful personal depiction of a particular, hitherto largely uncelebrated rural fringe-dwelling existence that is premised around more than just the artist's Aboriginality. Abdulla's art does of course work to record a certain kind of recent Aboriginal experience, but its power and its authenticity is equally rooted in its lively description of place. (10) I don't for a minute believe that this kind of autobiographical framing of country represents an exclusive Aboriginal domain, and I long to see the work of other artists with equally powerful and peculiar stories to relate from lives spent in particular country. I'm as keen to discover work of this nature by Aboriginal Australians as I am work by Australians with, say, Irish, Chinese, or Afghan cultural heritage.

In *Belonging – Australian's Place and Aboriginal Ownership*, Peter Read undertakes a broad-ranging critical evaluation of the claims to (and love of) place professed by a diverse range of Australians, himself included. He concludes that:

Belonging ultimately is personal. There are as many routes to belonging as there are non-Aboriginal Australians to find them. My sense of the native-born has come – is coming. It comes through listening but with discernment; through thinking but not asserting; through good times with my Aboriginal friends but not through wanting to be the same as them; through understanding our history but being enriched by the sites of past evil as well as good. It comes from believing that belonging means sharing and that sharing demands equal partnership.

Or, perhaps to put it another way: ‘The ways into the forest are limitless.’ (11)

#### References:

1. The cohesive and cooperative characteristics of the local communities in question is explored in *No Place Like Pekina – a story of survival* by John Mannion & Malcolm McKinnon, published by Pekina 125 Committee, 1999. (See: [www.pekina.com](http://www.pekina.com))
2. *Craft for a Dry Lake*, a memoir by Kim Mahood, Anchor Books 2000.
3. The monument to commemorate the Walloway Rail Disaster was erected by the Orroroo Goods Shed Heritage Group and unveiled on 17 November 2001, exactly 100 years after the rail accident occurred. The monument includes ceramic panels by artist Jim Dunstan.
4. *Scenic Point*, colour pencil drawing by Malcolm McKinnon, 1999. (Collection of Artbank Australia)
5. *Returning to Nothing – the meaning of lost places* by Peter Read, Cambridge University Press 1996.
6. *Belonging – Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* by Peter Read, Cambridge University Press 2000.
7. Ivan H. was one of many local people in the South Australian town of Burra interviewed in the development a script for an as yet unrealised multi-media performance work called *Talking Country* by Malcolm McKinnon, Peter Read and others, originally commissioned for the 2002 Adelaide Festival.
8. Tom D. was interviewed for the Talking Country project, *ibid*.
9. See *Jackson’s Track – Memoir of a Dreamtime Place* by Daryl Tonkin & Carolyn Landon, Penguin Books 1999. A strong rationale for the Bunjilaka gallery at Melbourne Museum is given by Tony Birch in *A Museum for the People – a history of Museum Victoria and its predecessors 1854 – 2000*, Scribe Publications 2001.
10. John Kean describes the compelling geographic specificity of Abdulla’s work in the catalogue for *River, Land and Memory – the work of Ian Abdulla*, Flinders University Art Museum, 2002.
11. Ross Gibson, quoting Eric Rolls’ meditations on the Pilliga Forest in northern New South Wales (and on places in general) in *Wild*, an essay film by Huzzah Productions, 1992.

#### Author’s by-line:

Malcolm McKinnon is an artist and filmmaker working mainly in rural communities. Over the past 15 years, his work has encompassed oral history projects, urban planning, public and community art projects and exhibitions. Based in Melbourne and in the southern Flinders Ranges in South Australia, his current practice is mainly focussed around documentary filmmaking and multi-media.