

Studies in Oral History

The Journal of
Oral History Australia

Issue 43, 2021



Talking Country with Reg Dodd at Finniss Springs

MALCOLM MCKINNON

Malcolm McKinnon is an Australian artist, filmmaker, curator and ghost-wrangler working mainly in the realms of social history and digital media. He has an abiding interest in the surprising labyrinths of living memory and the peculiar beauty of local vernacular. His films include The Farmer's Cinematheque, Making Dust and Seriously Singing.

This story comes from Finniss Springs, a 2,000-square-kilometre patch of desert country bordering Lake Eyre, in South Australia's far north. For the Arabana and for many other First Nations people, Finniss Springs has been, at different times and in various ways, a homeland, a refuge, a battlefield, a university and a museum. For Reg Dodd (born in 1940), Finniss Springs is the cattle and sheep station taken up by his Scottish grandfather and his Arabana grandmother in 1918. It's the site of the Aboriginal mission where he went to school, but also the place where he learned Arabana lore and traditional bush skills from older members of his extended family – a place of 'growing up two ways'. And like many people of his generation at Finniss Springs, he can take you to the tree in the dry, sandy creek bed beneath which he was born.

For me, Finniss Springs is a place I've been visiting regularly for over 30 years. It's also where I learned to keep my mouth shut and to listen deeply and patiently. This wasn't an ability I developed quickly or easily, and it required me to unlearn several unhelpful habits; the habit of asking too many questions, of hurrying to a conclusion, of feeling obliged to offer up an opinion. Eventually, over many years, I learned to listen for and give consideration to the prominent silences that characterise the telling of stories about this place; to appreciate the implicit meanings in the things deliberately unsaid. I learned to be patient enough to allow different parts of a story to accrue and coalesce over time. And I came to appreciate that many of the

stories about this place are never fixed – that there are multiple, coexisting versions of a given story, perceived through many different lenses. Perhaps a little like the complex artesian aquifers that sit beneath its surface, the stories of this place are characteristically multilayered and not easily mapped.

I've worked with Reg Dodd and others from his mob on a series of projects over these past few decades, recording and interpreting first-voice stories about the history of this place, as well as stories about Country itself. We've made short films, exhibitions and audio programs.¹ Most recently we worked together over several years to write a book, *Talking Sideways*.² It feels like this work with Reg has effectively been a long, episodic conversation, based on friendship and mutual trust, as well as a shared (but respectively distinct) connection to the Country where the work is rooted.



Figure 1 Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, Finnis Springs, 2018. Photograph by Malcolm McKinnon.

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- 1 These collaborative projects include a travelling exhibition *Working Together – Stories of Aboriginal involvement in the Overland Telegraph & the Old Ghan Railway* (Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, 2001), an audio tour *The Living Oodnadatta Track* (Northern Regional Development Board & South Australian Tourism Commission, 2007) and a series of short films *Growing Up Two Ways* (Reckless Eye Productions & Marree Arabunna Peoples' Committee, 2008 – a sample film from that collection can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/254437077>).
 - 2 Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, *Talking Sideways* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Publishing, 2019).

My work with Reg has always happened on Country. This has been vital because Country itself is always central to the narrative. Country is more than a backdrop, and often more than merely a prompt for the telling of stories. Rather, Reg's stories involve Country as an intrinsic element, as an active agent. Quite often the distinction between people and Country appears insignificant. It's as Kim Mahood has observed: '(For some Aboriginal people) place is lodged in the body, as essential to its proper functioning as the circulation of blood and the apprehension of thoughts'.³ And also Ross Gibson: '(Country) is shaped by persistent obligations, memories and patterns of growth and regrowth. Governed by this system of physical and metaphysical interdependence, *the country lives like something with a memory*, a force of the past prevailing in the landscape still'.⁴ And so a fundamental thing to understand about this kind of storytelling is that history is embedded in Country, rather than being a matter of abstract chronology. Reg Dodd's manner of storytelling frequently and effortlessly collapses or juxtaposes events from deep Aboriginal time with events from more immediate living memory or from his own lived experience. Historian Ingereth Macfarlane describes this collapsing of chronological time as 'a heterogeneous now' – a simultaneous privileging of events and experiences from all different times. For Macfarlane, Reg's kind of storytelling conjures the metaphor of a marble cake, encompassing 'disparate elements combined through no rigid technique'.⁵ There's a fundamentally different temporal logic evident here, at odds with the linear conception to which many of us are habitually attuned, and there's a significant cognitive shift required to accommodate it.

At Alberrie Creek, once the site of the railway siding on the old Ghan line closest to Finnis Springs mission, Reg walks around and points off in various directions, unspooling a string of stories from a dense web of memory:

3 Kim Mahood, *Position Doubtful: Mapping Landscapes and Memories* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2016), 168.

4 Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2002), 63, emphasis added.

5 Ingereth Macfarlane, 'Entangled Places: Interactive Histories in the Western Simpson Desert, Central Australia' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2010), 71–72.

That hill over there – when I was a little fella, that’s where I killed my first *kadni* [bearded dragon] ... I used to walk along the railway line here, picking up cigarette butts that I’d take home to the old man so he could get the tobacco for his pipe ... When the first diesel train came through we all came up from the mission. We stood here and waved these little British flags as the loco came by.

And at Jersey Springs, a little further north up the Oodnadatta Track:

These two hills: our people used to dig *yalka* [bush onion] in that area, then they’d peel them and throw that brown onion skin away. So on one side there was a heap of those brown skins, and on the other there was a heap of the little white *yalka*. So that little brown hill that’s there at Jersey Springs now, we call that place Yalka-nyuri. And the little white hill, just beside the brown one, we call it Yalka-parlu. All of these places in our Country have stories attached to them, and they extend on and on ... The stories give us an identity and allow us to see the land in a different way, as a living being which is really a part of us, because our ancestors’ spirits are within that land and they’re very real ... The land is a living thing that you can relate to, just like you relate to a person.⁶

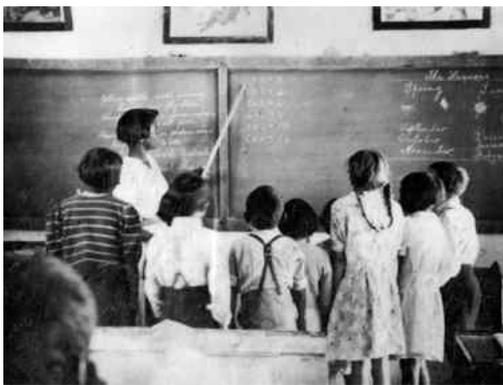


Figure 2 School class at Finnis Springs, 1947, with Esther Dodd at the blackboard. Photograph courtesy of Marree Arabunna Community Centre collection.

Reg Dodd has spent all his life living and working in this part of the Country, and he knows it several overlapping ways. He has deep connections and inherited cultural knowledge through his mother’s Arabana lineage and also through storylines relating to his father’s Arrente heritage. But he’s also connected through several generations of European

⁶ All quoted material by Reg Dodd is from Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, *Talking Sideways* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2019).

pastoralists, extending back to the 1860s. The experiences of his working life in the pastoral industry and in the railways, provide additional levels of knowledge and connection, as do the more recent decades of his working life in conservation and natural resource management and in cultural tourism. Perhaps most strikingly, the depth and intensity of his connection to this Country is the product of his constant presence. Reg makes me understand how 'looking after Country' may be most acutely a matter of being physically present, of monitoring with one's own eyes, skin, hands and feet.

To me, if you care about this Country and you want to look after it, you can't do that from Port Augusta or Adelaide or somewhere else. You have to be here, then you can talk to anyone who might come along. It's your Country and you can speak for it. You're part and parcel of this land, and that gives you a position of strength and authority that you can work from.

This perspective might seem problematic or challenging for many other Arabana people who, for various reasons, have spent much of their lives away from their traditional country. Many were compelled to relocate in search of employment when the pastoral industry shed much of its Aboriginal workforce in the late 1960s and '70s and when the old Ghan railway closed down in the early 1980s. Alternatively, they may have left in order to access improved educational opportunities or better health services in a bigger town or city. People continue to claim a deep connection, despite their physical absence. But Reg contends that:

There's a thin line, like a cord that connects you with this land. Once you've severed that cord and lost that continuity, then you might come back to visit but you don't really have that same connection anymore. I can come out here and talk with that bush or that hill because I'm a part of this place ... It's got to be a hands-on, practical thing that you have to immerse yourself in and feel in your heart.

Reg Dodd's seeing Country is a discipline that he's forever practising. For people unfamiliar with this place it might seem that he has extrasensory capabilities – his vision seems kaleidoscopic. He's always noticing things from the corner of his eye,

spotting small movements and tiny elements within a large space. Of course, this is the kind of vision that you'd need for hunting animals and harvesting plants.

When you follow the tracks of an animal or a bird or an insect, you're looking at what that creature is doing, and in a sense you actually *become* that animal or that bird or lizard or insect. The track is telling you a story about what the creature is doing, and in following the track you're living that story. I follow a track and I find out what he's eating and where he camps, what he's hunting or what he's running away from. And a lot of the old people that I've known, that's how they used to hunt. They might have only had a spear or a tomahawk, but they could kill a kangaroo because they understood exactly how that kangaroo would behave.

It's a vision that renders Country as something infinitely rich and dynamic. Sitting one day out at Frome Creek, just north of Marree, Reg tells me about tracking a grasshopper in the sandy creek bed, close to where we're boiling the billy. Sometimes on all fours, sometimes lying flat on his belly, Reg had watched the grasshopper for a long time. Eventually, he witnessed a miraculous thing – the grasshopper defecated, ejecting a neat turd, which it then propelled away in mid-air with a perfectly timed kick from one of its powerful hind legs. Reg even tried to find the turd, just to see how far it had travelled, but without success. But this, we have to acknowledge, is real attention to detail.

Reg takes photographs of his Country. I've heard people claim that the only effective way to picture this country is to adopt an aerial perspective, creating a type of mud map or sand painting. But for Reg, a depiction of Country has never involved that kind of perspective. Rather, he tends to make intimate pictures of the tracks made by mammals, reptiles and birds, pictures of flowering and fruiting plants, of particular sites of significance within the story of his family and Aboriginal mob. He focuses on the detail – perhaps the pattern of scales on a lizard's leg – not just for its own sake but to evoke a sense of the bigger country and the bigger story. Reg's photography, like his storytelling, is quite literally made from the ground up. These photographs are characterised as much by their *resolution* as by the perspective framed through

the lens. They convey a quite visceral sense of the living environment, revealing the erratic pulse of life in response to a highly variable climate.⁷

Coming to this particular Country on a regular basis and listening to people connected with it, I've developed an appreciation of its complexities. In particular, my ongoing conversations with Reg Dodd have given me intimations of a much deeper understanding, beyond my own instinctive grasp of this place. I've assimilated stories and knowledge existing on several different levels: aesthetic, ecological, historical, political and mythological, imparted through showing as much as through telling. Really, it's an ongoing education, focused within an expansive, shimmering horizon.

7 Reg Dodd's photographs have featured in several prominent exhibitions, including shows at the South Australian Museum and Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute. Several of these exhibitions have been staged in collaboration with the painter Lyn Hovey.