

Talking Country

Some illustrated stories of social memory in rural Australia Malcolm McKinnon

Talking themselves into the country:

As the son of parents born and bred in the country, I grew up amidst frequent talk of people and places. A lot of my immediate relatives and their friends seemed keenly engaged in a game of placing and mapping: they'd keep tabs on who married who; what became of this person's son or that person's daughter; where all of these people might have moved to or come from. I recall, for example, many trips along Sunraysia backroads where the talk between my mother and grandmother was all about who now lived on this fruit block or that one, what happened to the people who lived there before, or which unfortunate family had had a child drowned in the channel or killed in a rail crossing accident some years back. My mother especially has a phenomenal ability to encounter people with some direct or indirect connection to her home town of Red Cliffs. It's like a homing instinct. She runs into them all over the place (I remember an unlikely encounter with some fellow tourist atop the acropolis in Athens, for example), and she can extract their story and plot their social coordinates promptly and efficiently. For her and my grandmother, this local country is full of resonant memories and stories.

I grew up mainly as a city boy myself, moving suburb fairly regularly and never feeling conscious of an overriding attachment to anywhere in particular. It wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties, working with Aboriginal people in northern South Australia, that I became exposed again to this habit of social mapping, this ongoing recitation of names and places.

These days I spend regular 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. It's a place that beside 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.

The 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.' [1] 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 the 1880s, 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.

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 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. Places in this district are often named to signify a person or event long gone. There's a paddock sold to a neighbouring farmer by Paddy McNamara at some time in the 1930s. Although this bit of land has now 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'.

In work that I'm currently undertaking with local museums in various country areas, I'm always aware of similar, powerful residues of social memory. I'm recording and interpreting stories about all kinds of things in which a dominant aspect of the narrative is a restating of the significance of particular places and the people and the events attached to them. For example, Ian Fisher, a star jockey on racecourses throughout north-west Victoria in the 1930s and '40s, can recite a long list of disappeared courses once sustained by strong local communities. Standing at the site of what was once the racecourse at Rainbow, he tells me about winning a big race there in 1937 and remembers names of all the people that "made racing and were fond of their racing" in that era. He describes a world no longer visible, but his conversation ensures it isn't forgotten. [2]

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'. [3]

Staking a claim:

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 98 year-old grandmother. She has lived all her life in Sunraysia, 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.

At a similar 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 me 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 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 conjures up a time and place that might otherwise have slipped beyond reach. [4]

Throughout much of regional and rural Australia (especially 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. In many places this battle is defined by shrinking resources: forever fewer people, less time, 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. It's not just Aboriginal ceremonial grounds that have been forgotten, that have lost currency and meaning. In other places, the battle is fought in the face of sudden, large-scale changes within local economies and industries, where various forces combine to radically transform not just the physical environment but also the communities residing therein. In many instances and places, it's possible to see common resonance in the competing claims of attachment argued by vastly different peoples.

(I'm increasingly uncomfortable with too-easy and common polarisations of indigenous and non-indigenous cultural heritage and identity. I think there is far more common ground than is generally acknowledged, 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.)

Vital residues and traces:

In tracking shifting dominant perceptions of "the outside country" back of Bourke in western New South Wales, historian Tom Griffiths underlines the primacy of cultural factors in our management or custodianship of country and natural resources: 'Scientists often argue for the need to overcome deficits of knowledge, and rarely ask why we do not act upon what we already know. Most of the constraints working against change are cultural. We have to know ourselves as well as the country.' [5]

Most of us understand, I think, that the country is not simply made and remade with each succeeding wave of discovery and development. Old ground is not easily or permanently sealed over by the print of some new endeavour. And, really, all ground is old and complex, laden with residues and traces of social memory. We ignore this truth at our peril.

References:

1. Craft for a Dry Lake, a memoir by Kim Mahood, Anchor Books 2000.
2. Ian Fisher is the subject of one of a series of short films made by Malcolm McKinnon with local museums in the Victorian Wimmera and the southern Flinders Ranges region in South Australia under the aegis of a project called Triggered Stories, 2002 – 2003.
3. *Returning to Nothing* – the meaning of lost places by Peter Read, Cambridge University Press 1996.
4. Tom D. was one of numerous people from 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.
5. Tom Griffiths' essay *The Outside Country* published in *Words for Country*, edited by Tim Bonhardy & Tom Griffiths, University of New South Wales Press 2002.

Much of this paper has been adapted from my article *Places Not Forgotten*, published in *Artlink* magazine Vol.22 #2, 2002.



From top down:

- Joan Ellery's letterbox (replica of Orroroo Goods Shed), made by Geoff O'Loughlan, Orroroo 2001
- View from front door of Paddy Mac's place, Pekina, South Australia
- Detail from sentimental poem carved into rock face at Pekina Creek by J. Macdonald, 1896
- Detail from signature embroidered cloth from Burra, South Australia c. 1915

Photographs by Malcolm McKinnon

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.