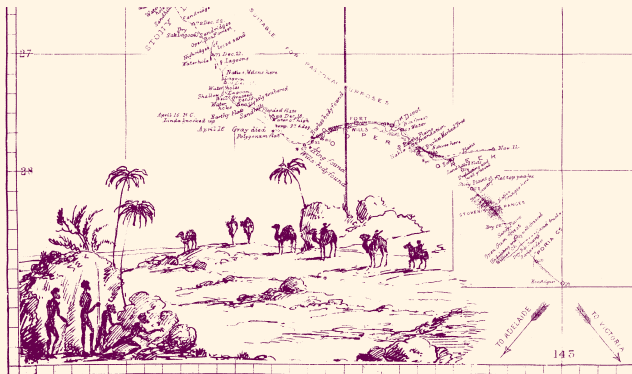




Subverting the Empire traces the influence of Australian colonial exploration on writers of contemporary Australian fiction. Exploration journals serve as points of origin for social myths that continue to exercise the national imagination. This book examines these myths through a reading of the work of Thea Astley, Gerald Murnane and Rodney Hall.

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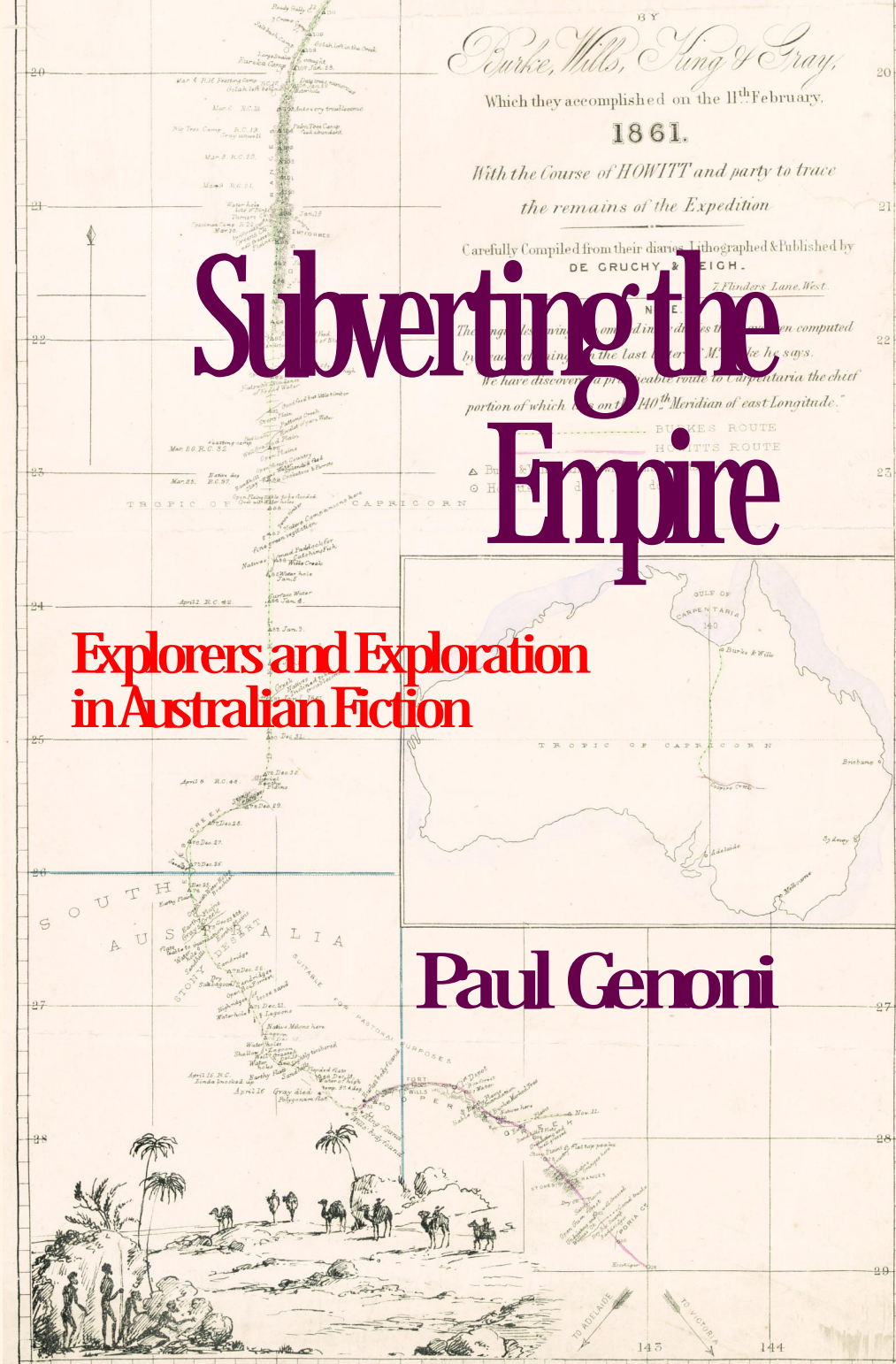
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Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction

Paul Genoni



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And finally to Reg and Joan and Lyn, who were there at the beginning and at the end, as I knew they would be.

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I know the names (learned painfully through homework) of several dozen capes, bays, promontories; and can trace in with a dotted line the hopeless journeys across it of all the great explorers, Sturt, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills. But what is beyond that is a mystery. It is what begins with the darkness at our back door. Too big to hold in the mind!

David Malouf Johnno

To put this another way, stepping into a story or constructing a map are much the same thing; and both are like tossing a stone at a window: the cobwebby lines fan out from the point of impact in all directions at once.

Janette Turner Hospital Oyster

INTRODUCTION

Long before the major landmasses of the southern oceans had been discovered and charted, there had been speculation as to their existence. Conjecture focussed on the probable existence of a great southern continent, and dreamers began to conjure up images of the shape of its extremities and the wonders that lay in its centre. From the first, the centre of the continent was imagined in utopian terms, and as early as the fourth century B. C., Athens was the source of descriptions of ideal antipodean communities.¹

It was not, however, until the mid-seventeenth century that the initial first-hand descriptions of the great southern continent began to reach Europe. In turn, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, English and French maritime explorers returned with tantalisingly incomplete and often contradictory descriptions of the physical face of the southern landmass. As the outline of the continent was slowly sketched in, speculation intensified as to its true nature and the forms of life and society it supported.

Writers of imaginative literature were quick to fill in the gaps in explorers' charts and knowledge. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced many literary renderings of southern lands, in which the utopian vision remained prominent. There developed a genre of fiction peculiar to the imagining of the austral world, which typically depended upon the device of shipwrecked sailors being

marooned on a southern continent or island, whereupon they stumble across a hitherto unknown utopian society. Overcoming numerous obstacles, they eventually manage to carry an account of their explorations back to the old world.²

Some of these imaginative accounts were remarkably prescient; a character in Richard Brome's play *The Antipodes* – first performed in 1638 – asks the question 'Are not their swans all black?'³ Given, however, the inadequate exploration, mapping and recording of the continent's physical features, they were generally lacking in any semblance of reality. According to the utopian renderings, the centre of the continent was imagined to be the green and fertile home to a politically and socially advanced race. Denis Vairasse's account of 1675, *The History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi: a Nation Inhabiting a Part of the Third Continent Commonly Called Terrae Australes Incognitae*, includes what is probably the first vision of what became the most lingering symbol of the fertile centre: the inland sea. Vairasse's *Terrae Australes Incognitae* is a symmetrical paradise with a lake in the heart of the continent, with an island in the centre of the lake, with a city in the middle of the island.⁴

These imaginary accounts indicated a developing fascination with the centre of the continent which, given the early reports of unprepossessing tribes on the coastal margins, seemed to be the only location where these ideal societies might yet be found. Moreover, in order to know a large landmass properly required more than a superficial knowledge of its perimeter. As Simon Schama has noted logic insisted that the essence of a land lay within its geographic heart.

The romanticisation of landscape always presupposes penetrating the interior – it presupposes that somewhere in the interior there will be a primal home (the source of a river, or some fantasised mythic ur-*wold*, some dark and majestic wood).⁵

Literature therefore provided what physical exploration could not yet achieve: an investigation of the heart of the great southern continent.

From the first then, the exploration of Australia was a literary as well as a geographic enterprise. Indeed, the physical exploration of inland Australia was comparatively slow to commence. Even after the establishment of the first permanent settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788, the exploration of the interior was not undertaken in earnest for some three decades, and thereafter remained a slow and painstaking business. Colonists continued to imagine the continental interior into being long before it was explored. This speculation continued to be optimistic, based on the vastness of the area awaiting discovery and the apparently temperate latitudes in which the bulk of the continent was situated. As Ross Gibson and Carol Lansbury have pointed out, there was a lingering readiness, both on the part of those who had some first-hand experience of the land and many who didn't, to believe that the bush and what lay beyond it would constitute an ideal site for expansion of the British empire.⁶

Indeed, in a novel such as Mary Fox's *An Account of an Expedition to the Interior of New Holland* (1837), the utopian dream of the continental centre was demonstrated to be alive and well.⁷ Fox's novel purports to be based on the journals of Hopkins Sibthorpe, an explorer who has led an expedition into the central reaches of the continent. After 'an anxious and tiresome journey of above a month' (9) Sibthorpe and his companions pass over a mountain range and discover a 'most extensive and delightfully fertile region, watered with numerous streams from these mountains, and interspersed with beautiful lakes' (15). This idyllic setting is populated by an ideal society of European origins known as Eutopia.

As with earlier versions of the utopian narrative, Fox's novel is primarily a political tract, in this instance a means of contrasting the prevailing political and social conditions of nineteenth century England with those ideals which were said to be possible elsewhere.

An Account of an Expedition to the Interior of New Holland was also a first attempt to give literary expression to the figure of the inland explorer as he was emerging in Australia. Furthermore, it derived its form from the genre of the explorer's journal, with Fox presenting herself as the editor of the expedition's journal based on 'rough notes taken by several members of the exploring party' (83).

At the time Mary Fox wrote her novel, men such as Sibthorpe and his companions were attempting to penetrate the centre of Australia and returning to publish accounts of their explorations. The physical exploration of Australia that was necessary in order to obtain a reasonably comprehensive geographic and topographic description of the continent was to take almost the entire nineteenth century. It was a long and difficult process requiring the participation of all colonial governments, many commercial interests, a series of heroic individuals, and the public at large. It involved numerous disappointments, some great successes, a number of tragedies, and a growing body of myth. For the most part, the reality of what was discovered and reported was far removed from the utopian visions favoured by Fox and her predecessors. Whereas speculation about the nature of the continent had been based upon supposition and fantasy, the explorers returned to the coastal cities having walked across ground which had hitherto existed for Europeans as little more than a blank space upon which they projected dreams of an ideal new world.

Explorers had at their disposal two major tools by which they could reveal the land. The first was the physical journey they undertook, in the process of which they discovered the land by forging paths across the face of the continent, frequently travelling where no European had gone before. The second was through the written journals they fashioned in order to give account of their explorations. In the explorer's journal the act of exploration was transformed into a text which sought to recreate the experience of both the travelling and the land that was travelled. In Paul Carter's

words, 'the Australian explorer . . . made history twice over, first by his journey and then by his journal'.⁸

As a result of their journals, during the almost one hundred years explorers were actively engaged in the physical discovery of Australia, they also contributed to the imaginative process by which the idea of 'Australia' was invented. Their journals became central to the process by which the land became known, and then further imagined into being, by those who did not have direct experience of it. In turn the journals became crucial to the sustained and evolving relevance of the explorer figure in twentieth century Australia. Of the masculine types that have their origins in nineteenth century rural and outback Australia – the explorer, the drover, the bushranger, the shearer, the swagman, and the miner – only the explorers left a detailed account of themselves and the part they played in the creation of the myths of Australia and their own type.

Particularly important was the role the explorers' journals played in destroying the lingering notion of the vast, fertile continental core. For whereas the journals were intended to record and validate the progress of the empire as it occupied the continent, they also began to subvert the imperial destiny by undermining the belief that such an immense space lying in apparently benign latitudes would be a natural home for Europeans.

Although a number of explorers clung to the dream of the inland sea and remained hopeful against rising odds that the centre of the continent would yield great riches, by-and-large the task fell to them of destroying the earliest myths about the Australian continent. In their place they fashioned potent new myths, which derived their power from the lingering sense of disappointment and despair resulting from the unexpectedly alien interior. The void the explorers encountered at the centre of the continent, which so disappointed the empire builders, has come to symbolise the failure of non-Aboriginal Australians to properly settle in their new homeland. As a result the figure of the explorer has emerged variously as a symbol

of heroic failure; a portent of the inability of the settler society to occupy the land to its full extent, and a reminder of the ongoing need for 'discovery' and understanding of the barren Australian heartland.

This book argues that the explorer, through the agency of his deeds, both real and as rendered in his journals, has become an iconic fact of Australian life; and that the 'act' of exploration has emerged as a unifying element in the Australian imagination. In particular, it does so by tracing the influence of the explorer-generated history, literature and myth in contemporary Australian fiction. The conclusion reached is that although explorers and their journals were indeed agents of empire, their lingering appeal is in large part due to the manner in which they subtly – and in most cases unwittingly – subverted the imperial exercise while seemingly serving its interests.

Australian fiction which draws upon exploration imagery goes beyond a national interest, in that it is part of a shared project among post-colonial societies of coming to terms with their history. Part of this shared effort is a need to examine identities which derive substantially from the fact that these nations and their indigenous people experienced a period of discovery, exploration and settlement by a colonising power. The period of exploration was crucial in that it determined many fundamental matters by which occupants of these nations would come to know and imagine themselves. These included: the geo-political boundaries which defined a nation's limits and determined the colonial power to which they would be responsible; the nature of the relationship with the colonial power and other distant centres of government and culture; the manner in which the imperial ideology and culture were transferred to the colony and its indigenous people; and the position of those indigenous people and their culture during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The history of exploration in Australia has had a particularly significant impact on the nation's imagination and literature because of the extended period over which it was

conducted, its comparatively recent conclusion, the hostile nature of much of the land which was explored, and the substantial body of explorer-generated literature to which it gave rise.

Another unifying element of post-colonial literatures has been their need to come to terms with their marginality in relationship with the established centres of political and cultural influence. For Australian writers, however, there has also been a contrary impulse in that they have needed to explore and express the marginal nature of the relationship Australians have with their own continent. This has given rise to conflicting views of Australia as being either a society which derives its identity by looking outward toward the recognized centres of power and excellence, or one which looks inward and attempts to centre itself within its own geographic space.⁹ Those who embrace the latter view, and believe that the centre of the continent is a repository of meanings about the essential nature of the Australian experience, inevitably find themselves addressing fundamental questions about the land and the manner in which it has been explored, annexed and settled.

In Australia, the 'exploration' of the land has remained as a continuing process. There has been an ongoing need for successive generations to reach some accommodation of a physical environment from which many are alienated in a practical sense. Large areas of the continent remain infrequently visited and little known, and individuals still need to discover for themselves a sense of belonging in a land which remains sparsely occupied in both a literal and imaginative sense. As Deane Fergie has written:

Sturt, Eyre and MacDouall (sic) Stuart have long since joined Burke and Wills in death, yet metropolitan Australians have maintained an expeditionary orientation to the interior. Though we often lose sight of it, the contours of culture and the terrain of the nation continue to be wrought in explorers' tracks.¹⁰

* * *

Previous examinations of explorers' writings have begun to trace the influence of their journals on Australian literature. Much of this attention, however, has been directed at the poetry and drama directly inspired by explorers and their deeds. Robert Sellick in particular has provided a guide to the relevant (and considerable) body of poetry, and his work has been supplemented by Roslynn Haynes.¹¹ Ross Gibson has examined the thesis of the 'diminishing paradise' of the Australian interior as it is expressed in the explorers' journals, and concluded that:

Writings such as Sturt's, Mitchell's and Eyre's . . . have influenced the formation of a national sense of identity, but they have become truly mythic only at second-hand and retroactively because their stories have penetrated the 'collective consciousness' through imaginative interpretations by modern writers.¹²

Gibson went on to examine this influence as it is reflected in Patrick White's explorer novel *Voss*, and he also examined White's treatment in *A Fringe of Leaves* of matters related to European and Aboriginal contact in the light of the explorer experience.¹³

This book extends these previous studies by focussing on more recent fiction, which does not immediately appear to draw upon the lives of known explorers. It argues, however, that in the writing of a number of Australian novelists there can be found evidence that their imaginations have been influenced by the history, literature and myths of Australian exploration. Attuned to the nuances of post-colonial thought, these novelists use the mythic appeal of the explorer figure as a means of representing the search for a personal metaphysic based on the encounter with the alien land. In exploring the metaphysical space of Australia their fiction draws upon various

tropes derived from the physical exploration of the land, and this in turn allows them to connect with important imaginative patterns used by non-Aboriginal Australians to understand themselves and their land. In particular they have absorbed the act of exploration as an analogy for any act of personal seeking; the lost inland sea has become a powerful metaphor for the ongoing failure to discover the spiritual centre of life on the continent, and the inability of the empire to possess the heart of the continent gives rise to the possibility of other forms of 'occupation' of the same space.

It will be suggested that the novelists featured in this study, Thea Astley, Gerald Murnane and Rodney Hall, are explorers of a new type, probing the metaphysical rather than physical spaces of Australia, and their novels serve as their journals; reports to their audience on what they have discovered from the frontier of discovering and charting their place in the world. In their novels the Australian land and landscape are explored both as a unique physical space and as a symbol for something essential about the experience of living in the continent. It is not surprising therefore, that such novelists should look with interest to the reports of those initial encounters with the land and space they now inhabit. They have found in the explorers' journals – the stories they contain and the myths they gave birth to – a plentiful source of metaphoric and imaginative detail with which to enrich their own explorations of the same space. For Astley, Murnane, Hall and other contemporary Australian writers, the explorer has become an unusually rich type from which to further the pursuit of that shibboleth of post-colonial cultures, the search for national identity.

It will be argued that these novels give further evidence of the failure of the utopian and imperial dreams held for life in the new land. Just as the continent refused to provide inland explorers with the abundant centre of which they dreamed it has also failed to provide more recent seekers with an obvious and readily accessible metaphysical centre. As novelists have turned to the heart of the

continent in search of a spiritual home, they have encountered the same indifferent and withholding land which frustrated previous generations of explorers, but they too have persisted in the exploration of a land which paradoxically continues to beckon with the promise of new beginnings. In doing so they posit alternative histories which describe contrary aspects of the Australian experience while subverting notions of 'exploration' as being primarily a means by which the interests of an expanding empire are served.

CHAPTER 1

EXPLORATION: THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

An explorer is an explorer from love, and it is nature, not art, that makes him so.

Ernest Giles, *Australia Twice Traversed*, II, 342.

The nature of the explorers' journals was substantially determined by the background of the men who wrote them. Of the major explorers of inland Australia only Hamilton Hume and John and Alexander Forrest were born in the colonies. All others were European born, and with the exceptions of Ludwig Leichhardt and Paul Strzelecki, they were British. A number, including John Oxley, Thomas Mitchell, Charles Sturt, George Grey, Peter Egerton Warburton and Robert O'Hara Burke, had military or naval careers before coming to the colonies, and many had continued in some form of government employ since their arrival. As most major expeditions were at least partly funded from the public purse, and leaders were chosen at the discretion of the colonial governors, they were in the main of the 'gentleman' class. Several, including the German Ludwig Leichhardt, were considered to be of less satisfactory pedigree, and this hindered their attempts to raise government support for expeditions.¹⁴

The explorers were therefore by-and-large men of a particular type – government men who were pleased to be in the service of the colonial power and to assist with the expansion of its influence. Many received favourable consideration from the British and colonial governments, with George Grey and Edward Eyre going on to gubernatorial appointments.

It is to be expected therefore, given the explorers' background, that their journals were constructed in a manner which reflected the values and interests of the empire. This group of explorers was involved in an act of possession. They ventured forth in order to annex the land on behalf of the British and colonial governments and related entrepreneurial interests. This task of annexation was crucial to the nature of the expeditions, and it largely determined the form of the written records that resulted from them. The explorers' journals are now commonly read as being evidence of, and instruments in, the process of imperial expansion.

One should be careful, however, of generalising too much about the nature of the explorers' journals. Despite similarities in their backgrounds they were also men of quite distinct and particular character, and their travels varied in the type of country encountered, the travails they were forced to endure, and the allowances they were prepared to make for the problems imposed by both the land and its native inhabitants. The explorers' journals also altered over time in response to changes in the type of exploration undertaken. As the disappointing results of early exploration made it obvious that the Australian interior would not prove as amenable to agriculture and habitation as had been hoped, the type of men who were drawn to the task, the hopes held for the expeditions they led, and the journals they left behind, changed consequently.

This chapter will examine the development of Australian exploration and the effect it had on the literary productions of three major nineteenth century explorers; John Oxley, Edward Eyre, and Ernest Giles. In doing so it will trace the decline in the importance

of the notion of the expanding empire to successive generations of explorers, and the emergence of other more personal narratives which would eventually ensure the ongoing relevance of the explorers and their journals. Ultimately, texts that were intended to celebrate the triumph of the empire also served to undermine its ambitions.

THE EMPIRE SERVED

The need for arable land had initiated the gradual movement inland during the early years of the nineteenth century, and squatters began taking up land further and further removed from Sydney. It was clear, however, that the land was of variable utility, and there remained both an economic need and a natural curiosity to find out what lay beyond the mountains which had hitherto limited the expansion of the colony.

Most of the speculation was encouraging. It seemed unthinkable that an unexplored landmass encompassing the majority of the Australian continent would not prove to contain great riches. The inland flow of the river system which arose from the western slopes of the Blue Mountains supported conjecture that there were vast fertile regions in the interior. Speculation was further enhanced when convicts who had escaped and returned reported that there were major rivers reaching far inland and possibly leading to large tracts of open water.

Thus the belief in the fertile interior persisted, and it carried with it the dreams of colonial administrators, pastoralists, traders and financiers. Money, from a mixture of public and private sources, was forthcoming to finance a series of exploratory journeys. The great period of Australian inland exploration began with the first journey of John Oxley in 1817 and continued until the south-north crossing of the western deserts by David Carnegie in 1896–97. It took most of the intervening period to dispel any hope in the possible existence of an inland sea or any other hitherto undiscovered area of

abundance in the central reaches of the continent.

The inland explorers were the first Europeans to look upon the vast and often desert regions of the Australian interior. Journals recording their travels were published by almost all major explorers, and they were widely read both in Australia and Europe. The colonial governments were generally well served by the diaries and journals kept by the explorers, in that most of them wrote at least capably, and a number of them very well. Oxley, Sturt, Mitchell, Grey, Eyre and Giles in particular wrote of their travels with style and insight. They were able to competently turn their hand to the numerous descriptive passages that were intrinsic to the genre, but were also capable of writing more contemplative passages that did not seem extravagantly forced or strained.

The interest shown within the colonies in the published records of the explorers was to be expected. The role of exploration in discovering new land of economic value was crucial to the future well-being of colonial Australia. The Australian public followed the exploits of the explorers with great interest, and they became amongst the nation's first heroes. As the competition between the colonies for economic wealth increased, the departure and arrival of exploring parties became the occasion for great celebration in the growing cities. In cases where disaster struck, as it did with the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition, it was the cause of anguish and soul searching.

That many individuals failed to return from these journeys – and in the instance of Leichhardt's doomed attempt to cross the continent from east to west a whole party disappeared without trace – only added to the fascination of the explorer-hero. Those who did return usually carried tales of having suffered great hardship, and of having been tested by the land and its native inhabitants. The published accounts of these travails were eagerly awaited by the admiring public and served to further enhance the sense of wonder and trepidation with which colonial Australians viewed their strange new land.

The explorers' journals were also read widely in Europe. In addition

to their obvious appeal to supporters of British imperialism, the journals also held a wider interest. The explorations they recorded were undertaken during a period when Europe had developed a fascination with the discoveries being made in the Pacific region. There was a realisation that – with the exception of the polar ice caps – the Pacific islands and the continent of New Holland were the last regions of the world to be explored by Europeans. This period of exploration coincided with the swing in European intellectual sympathy from the values of neo-classicism to those embodied in romanticism and scientific rationalism. With the rise of the latter there emerged a great professional and amateur interest in natural science, particularly in recording and classifying the various orders of the natural world. European scientists and the public alike therefore followed closely the discoveries being made in the Pacific, including those associated with the exploration of continental Australia.

The published journals were not the initial texts created from these journeys of discovery. The journals were based upon the field diaries that explorers were routinely required to keep by the Colonial Office. The Colonial Office had set down guidelines for these diaries following the failure by the earliest exploring parties to keep adequate records and maps. Gregory Blaxland had kept a diary when, with William Wentworth and William Lawson, he found a way through the Blue Mountains in 1813, and George Evans had also kept a diary in 1815 when he became the first European to explore beyond the mountain range. These first field diaries were, however, poorly received in London. Evans with his frequent refrain of, 'I am at a loss for language to describe the country'¹⁵, and 'it requires a clever person to describe this country'¹⁶ clearly tested the patience of the Colonial Office.

As a result Governor Lachlan Macquarie was issued with a set of instructions on the matter. These instructions stated that:

It is most desirable that any person travelling into the interior should keep a detailed Journal of his proceedings. In this

Journal all observations and occurrences of every kind, with all their circumstances, however minute, and however familiar they may have been rendered by custom, should be carefully noted down; and it is also desirable that he should be as circumstantial as possible in describing the general appearance of the country, its surface, soil, animals, vegetables and minerals, every thing that relates to the population, the peculiar manners, customs, language, &c., of the individual natives, or the tribes of them that he may meet with.¹⁷

The instructions continued to list the information required when recording climate, mountains, rivers, animals, vegetables, minerals and 'natives'.

Macquarie took note of these requirements, and he supplied a copy to John Oxley when he was chosen to lead the first expedition beyond the Blue Mountains. In addition Macquarie furnished Oxley with a second set of instructions particular to the expedition. These instructions reiterated the importance of recording:

the general face of the country, nature of the soil, woods, and animal and natural productions of the country . . . carefully examining and noting down each of these particulars, and adding thereto the nature of the climate, and description of such natives or aborigines of the country as you may happen to see . . . (*JTE*, 357–358)

Oxley thereby became the first explorer to cross the Blue Mountains who was both properly instructed as to the records that were required of him and sufficiently skilled to fulfil the expectations of those who waited upon the results. As Robert Sellick has demonstrated, these two sets of instructions given to Oxley had a lingering influence on the instructions issued to subsequent leaders of exploratory expeditions.¹⁸

The principal requirement of the field diaries was therefore that they serve as the official record of an expedition and the discovery of land over which the government claimed dominion. The government could not own what they did not know, and therefore charting accurate details of the ground traversed was a crucial role required of government sponsored expeditions. Accordingly, Macquarie instructed Oxley that:

It will of course be necessary in order to ascertain the exact distance and direction of your journies, whilst prosecuting your discoveries, that the country through which you travel shall be regularly chained and laid down upon a chart . . . (*JTE*, 358)

Indeed Oxley had been chosen to lead the party principally because of his employment as Surveyor-General to the colony.

It was for a related reason that expedition records were treated as government property. It was necessary that in order to assume control of the land the government must possess those documents wherein the discoveries were recorded. The records of the journey – the maps, charts, scientific measurements, specimens, and the field diaries themselves – became instruments on which the colonial government could base their claim to possess the land. Macquarie's instructions left Oxley in no doubt as to the importance of his records:

On your return from your journey . . . you are to direct all the journals or other written documents belonging to, and curiosities collected by the several individuals composing the expedition, to be carefully sealed up with your own seal, and kept in that state until after you have made your report in writing to me at Sydney, of the result of your expedition. (*JTE*, 359)

Central to the acquisitive function played by the diaries and published journals is that they recorded the ceremonies whereby the

colonising power established its claims of ownership. When George Grey was deposited on the north-west coast in 1837, the first act recorded in his journal was that which claimed the land as British.

We here first hoisted the British flag, and went through the ceremony of taking possession of the territory in the name of Her Majesty and her heirs for ever.¹⁹

A lone flag set flying on remote shores unlikely to be visited again for many years by subjects of either Britain or any other colonial power would, in itself, be of little importance in claiming this previously unexplored part of the continent. However, recording that ceremony in a journal which reported the occasion to interested governments provided substantial weight to British claims of sovereignty.

The explorers' journals also served the empire in that they recorded many of the more subtle acts of possession. In many ways exploration left its mark on the land and on the native people who were encountered. Camps were made and left, names assigned, trees marked, seeds planted, gifts exchanged with Aborigines, commemorative or religious ceremonies performed and companions buried, and these occurrences were faithfully recorded in the journals. In this way they became texts which signalled the intrusion into and appropriation of the land, as the explorers imported foreign customs and symbols into an alien environment, and marked their passage with the debris of travel.

These dual processes of political annexation and cultural appropriation reached something of a high point when John McDouall Stuart fulfilled the ambition of Sturt and Eyre, and reached the centre of the continent in April 1860.

Today I find . . . that I am now camped in the centre of Australia. I have marked a tree and planted the British flag

there. There is a high mount about two miles and a half to the north-north-east. I wish it had been in the centre; but on it to-morrow I will raise a cone of stones, and plant the flag there, and name it 'Central Mount Stuart'.²⁰

Having made camp, marked a tree, twice raised the flag, built a 'cone of stones' and endowed the spot with his name, Stuart moved on and eventually became the first explorer to cross the continent and reach the north sea. There he conducted similar ceremonies at the mouth of the Adelaide River, including the marking of a tree, the raising of the flag, the bestowing of names, the burial of documents in a tin case, and a series of speeches which concluded with 'three cheers for the Queen and three for the Prince of Wales' (*EA*, 410).

These are of course the spoils of exploration, the chance not only to make discoveries, but also to mark your passage across the land. As Stuart realised, however, this was only the beginning of a process by which the land and its inhabitants would be transformed and become subject to a range of imperatives – frequently referred to by the explorers as 'civilization' – imported from the imperial culture. Having raised the flag in the centre of the continent Stuart recorded his hope that 'it be a sign to the natives that the dawn of liberty, civilization and Christianity is about to break upon them' (*EA*, 165–166). The ceremonies at Adelaide River were recorded with a similar wish: 'I hope this may be the first sign of the dawn of approaching civilization' (*EA*, 410).

One of the defining characteristics of the civilization invoked by Stuart was its language, and the journals served to trace the advent of English into new spaces by recording the names which explorers bestowed on the geographic features they discovered. This process of naming was another instrument of possession, a means by which explorers assumed ownership of the land by dotting the landscape with references to their own culture and circumstances.

Many of these names carried strong imperial associations,

entrenching the names of royalty and vice-royalty in newly discovered landscapes. George Evans was one of the most adept at this practice, frequently recording his gratitude to his patron, Lachlan Macquarie, by naming various topographical features in his honour. In his travels Evans named the Macquarie Plains, Macquarie River, Mount Macquarie, Mount Lachlan and the River Lachlan. New names also frequently used to signify the encroachment of the scientific and commercial arms of the empire by immortalising the members of the various learned societies and entrepreneurs who had supported expeditions. On other occasions explorers chose to inscribe the land with more personal histories by naming features after themselves, members of their family or others they admired. As Oxley reported:

The naming of places was often the only pleasure within our reach; but it was some relief from the desolation of these plains and hills to throw over them the associations of names dear to friendship, or sacred to genius. (*JTE*, 91)

Naming was also a means of overwriting the identity of the newly discovered place with associations of other known places closer to the heart of the empire. Explorers frequently attempted to make the landscape familiar (or at least record something about it which they thought to be familiar) by naming discovered places after regions or features of the old world.

The use of names to imbue the new and strange landscape with imperial, personal or old world associations reached an incongruous climax in the habit of Thomas Mitchell in applying names derived from his experience in Wellington's army. Thus the landscape of New South Wales and Victoria was endowed with the names of battles, places and servicemen from the Peninsular Wars. Paul Carter has suggested that Mitchell's use of names with military associations was part of a strategy of occupation that the explorer employed in order to ensure the subjugation of the land and its inhabitants.

Mitchell, then, did not simply assert a parallel between his own exploits and those of a military commander: he worked out the parallel in detail, 'possessing' a country with names and views quite as effectively as a general deploying his troops.²¹

Thus while the names Mitchell bestowed may now seem inappropriate, they were not applied gratuitously. Naming was a very serious business to Mitchell. He saw his role as that of harbinger of a great civilization, and names were to be used thoughtfully and precisely, since the privilege of bestowing them was one of the honours that fell to those who made the maps which others followed.

Mitchell deplored the efforts of any fellow explorers whom he believed failed to keep accurate measurements and records of the land they discovered. He argued that land which was incorrectly measured and recorded had not been truly 'discovered' at all, but merely travelled upon. He would therefore deny such explorers the right to choose names, as names were the record that the land had not only been travelled over and various topographical features seen, but that it had been explored to the fullest extent; that is, observed, mapped, measured, and properly named, and thereby brought within the purview of the empire.

The work of Mitchell, Stuart and other explorers ensured that the empire and 'civilization' were at hand, and signs were left in the wilderness to mark their onset. By travelling across the land, mapping it, describing it, naming it and leaving signs of their passage through it, explorers had begun the long process by which non-Aboriginals would first occupy, and then attempt to understand and internalise this new space. In turn their journals carried the record of the early stages of this process back to a waiting Europe, announcing that the land had been prepared for the next stage of appropriation and signalling the advent of the empire.

THE EMPIRE SUBVERTED

The explorers' field diaries and journals were also of vital importance to the empire for the information they contained about possible economic benefits that could be derived from the land. The colonies not only had a need to find new agricultural land in order to feed the growing population, but they had also developed a strong commercial imperative which required trade in order to profit both the colony and the mother country. Such was the importance of trade that the instructions from the Colonial Office to Macquarie required explorers to provide 'A circumstantial account of such articles, if any, as might be advantageously imported into Britain' (*JTE*, 361).

Expeditions were often shaped by a need to pursue those features which promised the greatest chance of providing economic benefit. In nineteenth century Australia, only slowly becoming aware of the wealth of its mineral resources, this meant agricultural land which could be used for cropping or grazing. As Mitchell reported, he undertook his journeys in the hope of discovering a region, 'teeming with useful vegetation, abounding with rivers, hills, and vallies, and waiting only for (an) enterprising spirit and improving hand to turn to account the native bounty of the soil'.²²

Rivers were thus followed and explored with great interest. They not only seemed likely to lead to well watered and productive regions in the interior, but navigable waterways would also provide for the easy traffic of produce to the coast. The prime geographical goal with which Macquarie entrusted Oxley in both 1817 and 1818 was to determine the course and junctions of the Lachlan and Macquarie rivers, and many subsequent expeditions in eastern Australia were commenced with the purpose of solving the questions posed by the 'riddle of the rivers'. Not only did the explorers fail to locate extensive navigable inland rivers, but they were also disappointed in their efforts to find the vast agricultural regions that it had been assumed

must lie at the heart of the continent. Whereas the diaries were intended to record the discovery of a land suited to the reception of the empire, this was not the case. For although useful areas of arable land were discovered and reported, the overwhelming impression given by the journals in this regard is one of disappointment and failure. This in part was because most explorers lacked sufficient knowledge of farming in arid climates to recognize valuable grazing land. Oxley, Sturt and Eyre all dismissed as worthless land which has subsequently supported valuable agricultural industry. In many instances, however, what they discovered was accurately assessed as being of little value for agricultural purposes, and therefore of no immediate interest to the colonies or the empire. This was a matter of great disappointment not only to the colonial government, but to the explorers themselves who frequently returned to the coastal cities in despair.

In some regards therefore, the empire considered itself ill-served by explorers and their journals. In so far as they reported the state of the interior to the governments and the various agricultural and mercantile interests poised for profit, the journals functioned to undermine the interests of the empire they purported to serve. Try as they might – and several explorers were not above exaggerating the value of their discoveries – the unwanted message of the explorers' journals was that the potential of the Australian continent lay at its periphery.

Even in the applying of names, explorers managed to undermine the ambitions of the empire. In addition to embedding many names with strong imperial associations on to the maps of the interior, they also used names to 'map' the progress of an exploring party and provide a commentary on its success or otherwise. In doing so they gave rise to the commonly cited litany of names that are said to embody some essence of the Australian landscape: Mount Hopeless, Forlorn Hope Range, Mount Misery, Mount Barren, Mount Disappointment, Refuge Rocks. At least one explorer, Ernest Giles, seemed to believe

that these names were intrinsic to the landscape, just waiting to be discovered along with the empire-defeating features they signified:

Up to a certain time we called this the North-West Mountain, as it bore in that direction when first seen, until we discovered its proper name, when we christened it Mount Destruction.²³

Such names, recorded in texts that were intended to turn discovery into occupancy, suggested that the land was unreceptive to the advance of the empire. They imaginatively captured the alien character of the land, and served as an indication of the hardship suffered by the explorers themselves – a reflection of their state of mind as they battled the alien landscape. Such names supported the message contained elsewhere in the journals, that the inland was a dangerous place, unreceptive to European notions of an ideal landscape.

The journals were also notable in that they recorded the first contacts with the Aborigines of the interior. As per instructions, many of these observations were of an anthropological or quasi-scientific nature, recording dress, speech, appearance and customs, but there were also numerous accounts of the interaction between the two parties. These interactions were sometimes friendly, but were frequently marked by distrust and suspicion and all too often ended in calamity.

Clashes with Aborigines were frequently made a centre-piece of the published accounts of expeditions. They offered exciting material for both descriptive and illustrative purposes, and served to emphasise the difficulties faced by explorers as they sought to spread the benefits of empire to new places. To some extent this supported the empire's purpose by allowing Aborigines to be portrayed as 'barbarians' or 'savages' who were given to – in Mitchell's phrase – a 'savage thirst for our blood', and who were therefore deemed to be incapable of prior ownership of the land and badly in need of a civilizing influence. This portrayal of Aborigines also undermined the imperial cause, however,

by instructing the reader that the interior was an inherently uncivilized place which remained the domain of a dangerously unreliable foe. For although it was the Aborigines who suffered substantially heavier losses as a result of clashes, it was – not surprisingly – the occasional death of members of exploring parties at the hands of Aborigines which left the foremost impression on the reading public.

In a number of important ways therefore, the explorers' journals served to warn colonial and European readers that the Australian interior was not the natural site for imperial occupation that had been imagined. It was at best a problematic option, and governments and the public were given cause to believe that their interests were best served in the limited but safer environment offered at the margins of the continent.

This tendency of the explorers' journals to undermine the expectations of the empire was exacerbated by a further factor: that the interests of the explorer-author, keen to establish his heroic credentials, were often furthered by highlighting the inherently difficult nature of the Australian inland.

THE EMPIRE BUILDER AS HERO

Important as the field diaries were, they constituted only the first stage by which the explorers' renderings of the interior were made available to an audience. Not surprisingly, time in the field was limited, and entries in the diaries were primarily concerned with the exigencies of travel and the need to record scientific and topographical data. More rhetorical or philosophical passages (which were anticipated by the reading audience) were added later when the diarist had sufficient time in which to contemplate the journey and devise some suitable musings.

In some cases the preparation of the final published text was undertaken by the explorer himself, but in several instances another editorial hand assisted. In either case it was common for a certain

amount of rewriting to be done prior to publication in order to strengthen the appeal of the journals to the reading public. For whereas the field diaries were fashioned to meet the immediate requirements of the colonial governments, the published accounts had a different audience and function. The reading interests of the general public demanded not only an account of alien topography, exotic flora and fauna and savages both noble and ignoble, but hopefully a rattling good yarn in which the valiant explorer emerged as a hero and champion of European civilization.

It is a persistent sub-text of the explorers' journals, that in addition to serving the needs of the empire they were also shaped to fulfil an individual's desire for personal reward and fame. As Ernest Giles reflected, his explorations had been 'for vanity, or fame, or honour, or greed, and to seek the bubble reputation' (*ATT*, II, 201). Explorers were well aware that publication of their journals was the most important means by which their fame would be secured. The journals were a form of autobiography in which the explorer-author had the opportunity to present himself as he wished to be remembered – that is, as a hero. A measure of the effectiveness of the published journals in creating the reputation of explorers is that those who crafted the most readable and exciting accounts of their adventures remain the best known. John Forrest and Augustus Gregory carried out explorations that were as bold and effective as any, but as a result of the comparatively bland accounts they provided of their journeys they are not as well remembered as others whose achievements were less significant.

Just how keen the explorers were to cast themselves as heroes is evident from examining the published journals. They typically include an introduction that served several purposes, one of which was to place the author in the role of an epic hero by stressing the extent of the task ahead. It also gave the explorer the opportunity to reflect on his role as a champion for the wider interests of the colony and civilization in general. Thus Mitchell wrote;

I had yet to traverse 300 miles, for to that distance from Sydney the flocks of the colonists extended, before I could reach the vast untrodden soil, the exploration of which was the object of my mission. I felt the ardour of my early youth, when I first sought distinction in the crowded camp and battle-field, revive, as I gave loose to my reflections and considered the nature of the enterprise. But, in comparing the feelings I then experienced with those which excited my youthful ambition, it seemed that even war and victory, with all their glory, were far less alluring than the pursuit of researches such as these; the objects of which were to spread the light of civilization over a portion of the globe yet unknown . . . (*TE*, I, 5)

By stressing the journey across 'the vast untrodden soil', comparing his task to the trial and triumph of military campaigns, and finally taking upon himself the mantle of civilization, Mitchell is claiming the role of the epic hero being sent forth to prevail over unknown dangers on behalf of his people. It is also, however, a resolutely personal narrative. Although Mitchell is exploring on behalf of the empire and its citizens, he is doing so as their champion, and his journal is carefully structured to not only relate history but to tell *his* story. Like other explorers, Mitchell fashioned his journals in order to make the heroic nature of his explorations unmistakable.

By coveting the status of hero, and allowing this desire to influence the journey and the published records that resulted from it, explorers were engaged in the creation of parallel texts. One was designed to appease the needs of the imperial enterprise by providing the variety of scientific, geographic and anthropological information needed in order to further the advance of the empire. This text constructed the explorer as the loyal servant of imperial ambition, and was underwritten by a desire to find hospitable and immediately habitable land.

The other, and less obvious text, carried far more personal

meanings. This second text was born of the failure of the explorer to fulfil his role in the imperial project. When the nascent 'hero' finds that his ambition to achieve fame by discovering land required for the favourable expansion of the empire has been thwarted, he realises he might yet redeem his reputation by using his journal to emphasise the personal qualities which have allowed him to survive and endure under appalling conditions. These secondary texts depended for their success on a memorable dramatic impetus born of the engagement between the explorer-hero and the alien landscapes peopled by hostile natives.²⁴

These two texts were in opposition. The former demanded that the land be rendered as an inviting blank, ready for what Thomas Mitchell described as 'the immediate reception of civilised man'. It was a land which should conform to the empire's accepted notions of agricultural abundance and agreeable aesthetics. The latter achieved their impact by exploiting the contrary effect of highlighting those aspects of the inland the empire most feared – the difficulty of travelling, surviving and living in some of the least hospitable areas of the globe.

The existence of these parallel texts will be investigated by examining the journeys and journals of John Oxley, Edward Eyre and Ernest Giles. Their careers cover almost the full period of major inland exploration, and serve to demonstrate the manner in which the imperial cause was supplemented by far more personal meanings in the explorers' journals.

JOHN OXLEY: *JOURNALS OF TWO EXPEDITIONS INTO THE INTERIOR OF NEW SOUTH WALES*

John Oxley was the first significant explorer of inland Australia. Surveyor-General of the colony since 1812, Oxley undertook two major excursions to the west of the Blue Mountains. In 1817 he followed the Lachlan River until forced back by a watery morass

and failing supplies, and in 1818 he traced the Macquarie River to a point where it dissipated into a series of marshes.

Oxley's *Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales*, published in 1820, is the founding text of Australian inland exploration. Such was the taste for exotica from the new world that by 1821 Oxley's journals had already been translated into Dutch and German.

It is therefore surprising that Oxley's journals have frequently been neglected by commentators. Oxley is overlooked by Ross Gibson in his study *The Diminishing Paradise*, in which Gibson examines the ebb and flow of optimism about the possible nature of the continent by drawing on the journals of Sturt, Eyre and Mitchell. Gibson nominates the period 1835–1850 as the period of 'explorers' literature', thereby effectively removing Oxley's journals from the canon. Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* wherein Carter examines the settlement of Australia as an example of 'spatial history', also ignores Oxley in favour of later explorers.

This emphasis on the later journals can be explained in several ways. They derive from the period when exploring activity in Australia was at its peak, and they contain a far greater intensity of action, drama and character than is apparent in Oxley's writing. Oxley's expeditions were also comparatively modest in terms of the distance covered, and they were later dwarfed by the epic treks of Eyre, Leichhardt, Warburton, Stuart, Giles and others. The hardships survived by Oxley were also comparatively minor when compared to those endured by later expeditions as they pushed ever further into the arid regions of the continent.

Oxley's journals were, however, the first to record the interior reaches of the continent, and they remain a milestone in the long process by which non-Aboriginal Australians have come to terms with their place in an alien landscape. The writing of such a journal was a task which Oxley was remarkably well equipped to perform. He not only had broad literary interests, but in his role as Surveyor-

General he had developed a particular interest in explorer literature. When Oxley's library was auctioned in 1828, the catalogue revealed one of the largest collections of books in the colony including numerous volumes related to the maritime discovery of Australia and the land-based exploration of North America.²⁵

Oxley was therefore equipped with not only Macquarie's explicit instructions as to what he was to observe and record, but also an intimate knowledge of the style and structure which had been employed by previous explorers in recording their travels. There is ample evidence that later Australian explorers were well read in the travels of those who had preceded them, including Oxley. Both Sturt and Mitchell frequently referred to Oxley's observations in their own journals. Oxley's journal is worth consideration therefore, both for its own worth, and for the influence it had in establishing an archetype of the Australian explorer narrative.

In order to comprehend Oxley's reactions to the country he discovered, and the disappointment with which his reports were met, it is necessary to understand the expectations that were held for the interior of the continent. Although it had taken twenty-five years to breach the mountain barrier, the colonists, fired by the enthusiasm of Governor Macquarie and the need for new agricultural land, were now eager to uncover the secrets of the interior. Immediately after a path had been found across the Blue Mountains, Macquarie ordered a road to be constructed. Soon after its completion in 1815 the Governor travelled the route personally, eventually publishing an account of his journey which was the first publicly available description of the land to the west of the Blue Mountains.²⁶ Also important were the tentative inland explorations undertaken by George Evans which furthered the belief in a fertile and well watered interior. Macquarie therefore decided to press ahead immediately with further exploration to be led by Oxley, and the colony held high hopes for the success of Oxley's two expeditions. He was to be but the first of many explorers whose substantial

achievements and discoveries were belittled by the magnitude of the expectations held both by the colonists and the explorers themselves.

What Oxley did discover, and record in his journals, was a great deal of unprepossessing country. The first expedition was conducted in a season that was particularly wet in the region of the Dividing Range, but very dry inland. As per Macquarie's instructions, Oxley set a course along the Lachlan River, but the river proved difficult to navigate due to its volume and high speed. At other times the river dissipated into a wasteland of swamps and marshes.

It is impossible to fancy a worse country than the one we were now travelling over, intersected by swamps and small lagoons in every direction; the soil a poor clay, and covered with stunted useless timber. (*JTE*, 20–21)

When the party abandoned their boats and proceeded on foot, they found only a desolate scrubland in the grip of drought. Much of what Oxley discovered is now important farming country, but to the explorer in search of obvious abundance and memorable landscapes, it seemed little more than waste. Oxley frequently describes the land as a 'desert', although this was a desert of 'thick eucalyptus brush, overrun with creepers and prickly acacia bushes' (50), rather than the sand or stone deserts of the western interior which confronted later explorers.

In numerous passages Oxley touches upon themes which were to be reiterated by later explorers in their reactions to the land. He finds that beyond the initial impressions created by the difficulty of the terrain and its unusually barren appearance, there lies a range of subtler inflections which are somehow alienating. These include the wearying heat, the sameness, the silence, the lack of animal life, and the domination of certain plants that seemed designed to make life difficult for the traveller. The land is viewed as hostile, and incapable

of providing the most basic requirements for the advance of civilization such as soil and climate capable of sustaining crops and livestock.

Oxley's spirit is oppressed by the lack of variety and the desolate isolation, and he complains of 'the melancholy feelings which the silence and solitude of such wastes is calculated to inspire' (41). This note of melancholy surfaces frequently, and it is always linked in romantic fashion to the appearance and the 'temperament' of the country over which he travels. Nature it seems has produced a landscape designed to weigh upon the mind. Oxley writes that 'our spirits were not a little depressed by the desolation that seemed to reign around us: the scene was never varied, except from bad to worse' (60).

In addition to the unexpected harshness, it is this sameness of the land which appals Oxley. To a travelled Englishman whose temperament is conditioned by variety in the landscape, this was a new and dispiriting experience.

There is a uniformity in the barren desolateness of this country, which wearies one more than I am able to express. One tree, one soil, one water, and one description of bird, fish, or animal, prevails alike for ten miles, and for one hundred. A variety of wretchedness is at all times preferable to one unvarying cause of pain or distress. (113)

The barrenness and sameness of the environment clearly weigh upon Oxley and disturb his cast of mind, but it cannot be these factors alone which induce his melancholic reaction. As a sailor he was accustomed to long periods of flat horizons and an unvarying environment. Oxley's reaction can only be fully explained by the disappointment of his expectation that he would encounter a fertile land which could deliver an economic return to the empire, and which was possessed of a variety and temperament which would be

welcomed by those who would follow in his footsteps. Oxley's journal expresses a rising sense of despair as he realises that his discoveries will not meet the high hopes held for his expedition.

At its most extreme Oxley's melancholic response to the land is transposed into the first hint of another theme that is to recur in the explorers' journals: that the land is somehow bereft or cursed.

Nothing can be more melancholy and irksome than travelling over wilds, which nature seems to have condemned to perpetual loneliness and desolation. We seemed indeed the sole living creatures in those vast deserts. (91)

How can the empire prosper in a place which is shunned by even the wild beasts? What commenced as an adventure of exploration and discovery, an examination of new land which Macquarie and Oxley had hoped would be as revelatory as the great expedition led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in the Americas, rapidly deteriorated into an ordeal to be endured and survived.

What is remarkable about Oxley's journal is how little of a sense of wonder they record in the explorer. Other than a passing acknowledgment of the beauty of some of the new species of birds and plants which his party collect, he finds nothing in the plains to excite his interest. Oxley perseveres in 'the hope that the morrow will bring us to a better country' (65), but all sense of genuine expectation rapidly dissolves. His propensity to internalise the dismal landscape robs him of any joy or excitement that might be had from being the first European to walk this ground, and his melancholic reaction to the lack of material value in the land deters him from any deeper contemplation of the possibilities offered by this alien terrain. Too much is simply unattractive to his eye, 'and so utterly destitute of the means of affording subsistence to either man or beast' (54) that it can be of no value to the empire. Oxley was the empire's man doing the empire's work, and if he judged the value of

that work to be of scant economic benefit to the empire then it provided him with little further interest. He concludes that there is 'very little probability' that 'these desolate plains (will) be ever again visited by civilized man' (58).

Although disappointed, Macquarie was undeterred by the failure of Oxley's first expedition, and he soon authorised the explorer to make a second effort. The 1818 expedition was again frustrated in its major aims of locating usable farming country and tracking the Macquarie River to its outlet by the harshness of the terrain and a series of impenetrable marshes. The party was eventually forced eastwards, where the country was no easier to negotiate, being a mixture of swamps and barren scrubland. For a second time Oxley was horrified that his exploration would disappoint the expectations that had been formed by the colony, and as on his previous expedition he is cast into a depression, complaining of 'the utter loneliness of feeling we cannot help experiencing in these desolate wilds' (264). Eventually he falls back on the descriptive habits of his predecessor Evans, and concedes that it is 'country that baffles all description' (250).

Oxley's response to the land anticipated that of subsequent explorers of the Australian interior. Although later reactions became gradually less extreme as explorers became better prepared for the conditions they might encounter, their explorations were typically founded on an optimism that land of economic advantage to the colony must exist and would be theirs to discover. The paradisaical myths died hard, and all of the great explorers of the Australian inland had at some point to come to terms with the gulf which separated their dreams from their discoveries.

Oxley had to contend with a failure not only of the economic and strategic hopes upon which his expeditions had been established, but also a disappointment of his aesthetic expectations. This is hardly surprising, for as Simon Ryan has concluded, 'the importation of a European aesthetic into Australia results in construction and evaluation of the land in comparison to ideal qualities'.²⁷ That ideal

was founded on experience with landscapes of a vastly different scale, form and character from those which prevailed in western New South Wales. Whereas Oxley and other explorers struggled to find the words to express what it was they found distasteful about the new land, they did possess a vocabulary and technique, understood by the readers of their journals, by which they could express their approval of favourable regions or vistas. This was achieved by relying upon comparison to established English conceptions of what constituted an ideal landscape.

Not only were Oxley and later explorers predisposed by personal experience to prefer landscapes of a very different type to those which they encountered in inland Australia, but the prevailing intellectual and aesthetic values of the time were significantly at odds with the character of the Australian interior. During the early periods of Australian exploration the neo-classical ideal, with its preference for order and harmony expressed in a landscape over which man could exercise control and engage as an object of design, was being supplanted by romanticism which placed a new emphasis on the importance of nature to the human world. The romantic temperament admired wilder and more natural landscapes which may even present elements of danger.

Although the emerging romantic preference was for natural landscapes, they were, however, landscapes of a type that conformed with the general notion of the 'picturesque'. The ideal picturesque landscape featured irregularity, contrast, spectacular geological formations, variations in light, exotic flora, and water in its many manifestations but preferably flowing rapidly or tumbling. Clearly this excluded vast areas of the Australian inland, and the further explorers reached into the interior the less likely they were to find vistas that met these descriptions.

The terms 'romantic' and 'picturesque' are widely used in the explorers' journals to suggest approval of the landscape, and Oxley is no exception. For despite encountering in both of his expeditions

large tracts of land that he considered to be economic and aesthetic wastelands, he structured his journals to highlight the discovery of those few landscapes which did conform to the picturesque ideal.

In each case these discoveries came on the return journey to the coast, when the explorer was aware that his explorations would be largely assessed as failures. There is a definite elevation of his spirits as the party returns to Bathurst along the southern reaches of the Macquarie River on the first journey; and the second expedition is rewarded by the discovery of some fertile and agreeably picturesque country in the Port Macquarie hinterland. There is belated satisfaction for Oxley when he can report having discovered landscapes which excite his eye for picturesque detail.

These hills were rocky and barren, the lower grounds a red loamy clay; but the intermingled light and shade formed by the different description of trees and shrubs, the hills, but above all the noble lake before me, gave a character to the scenery highly picturesque and pleasing. (127)

The explorer reserved his truest excitement and appreciation, however, for landscapes which managed to both satisfy his romantic temperament and offer some hope of economic advantage:

Imagination cannot fancy anything more beautifully picturesque than the scene which burst upon us. The breadth of the valley to the base of the opposite gently rising hills was, between three and four miles, studded with fine trees . . . In the centre of this charming valley ran a strong and beautiful stream, its bright transparent waters dashing over a gravelly bottom, intermingled with large stones, forming at short intervals considerable pools . . . (184–185)

In these regions Oxley belatedly encountered some of the landscapes he had anticipated at the commencement of his expedition. These discoveries, although only small compensation, did allow him the opportunity to structure his journal in such a way that each expedition ended on a small note of success.

In *The Course of Empire*, Robert Dixon has interpreted the Australian explorer journals according to the epic form derived from the lingering influence of neo-classical ideas of the expansion of the empire. Examining the influence of Nicholas Biddle's *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark* (1814),²⁸ which recounted the journey of the two American explorers as they traced the interior river system to the Pacific Ocean, Dixon concludes that by the time exploration of the Australian interior had begun 'there had emerged an archetypal narrative of inland exploration' of which Oxley was well aware as a result of his interest in explorer literature.

The explorer-hero is a harbinger of civilization, and his journey precedes the course of civilization in the new world. His story involves a number of basic topoi: the pursuit of a great river of the west, passage through a fertile garden, a testing in the wilderness, passage through barrier mountains, and the arrival on the opposite coast.²⁹

To illustrate his paradigm Dixon draws upon the journals of Oxley and Mitchell, which reasonably approximate the suggested model in most features. In Oxley's case, however, there is no arrival at an opposite coast, but rather the discovery of some fertile ground in the course of the return journey to the eastern coast.

The particular form of the epic narrative as described by Dixon is not the only one which pertains to Australian explorer literature, but it is hardly surprising that it appealed both to the explorers and the reading public. With its basic structure of departure, adversity,

discovery and return, the epic narrative had the potential to excite the readers' imagination, satisfy their thirst for knowledge of exotic regions and reassure them that the imperial enterprise was flourishing.

That Oxley's modest discoveries were made only after he had returned to the vicinity of the coast, however, necessarily underscored the disappointment of the hopes that the colony held for the land further west, and therefore undermined his attempts to mould a classic epic narrative. The ambitions of the empire required that the vast hinterland beyond the mountains be at least as equally productive as the areas nearer the coast. At a time when the colony was looking inland with optimism, Oxley's discoveries suggested that expansion of the colony might only be possible at the margins of the continent.

As a coda to his journal, Oxley did, however, make a further attempt to redeem his narrative in the eyes of the empire by holding fast to his belief in the fertile interior. His published journals reproduced his report to Macquarie in which he offered the possibility of an 'inland sea' as a lure to further exploration, and in doing so he bequeathed to Australian exploration – and to the Australian imagination – its great ur-myth.

To assert positively that we were on the margin of the lake or sea into which this great body of water is discharged, might reasonably be deemed a conclusion which has nothing but conjecture for its basis; but if an opinion may be permitted to be hazarded from actual appearances, mine is decidedly in favour of our being in the vicinity of an inland sea . . . (244)

The belief that such a sea might exist was crucial to the dynamic of Oxley's narrative. Possessed of only minor discoveries by which he could fashion a climax to his journal, he creates in its place a sense of anticipation about a great discovery that was almost made. Oxley concludes that the 'long disputed point' of the existence of the inland

sea would be solved 'within a few months' (xv). Its non-existence was not, however, conclusively settled until nearly fifty years later.

Oxley therefore worked hard to structure his journals in order to suggest the near-discovery of a land of plenty, thereby hoping to redeem his otherwise 'disappointing' efforts. This was a problem which also plagued later explorers. Such was the continuing optimism about the future of the continent, that even the fertile regions which were discovered seemed modest compared to the expectations. Their 'fame' continued to be based upon their success or otherwise in discovering land of economic benefit to the colony, and it is apparent that some – notably Thomas Mitchell – were not above exaggerating the value of their discoveries in order to add the necessary heroic lustre to their journals.³⁰

It was apparent that while the major goal, the abundant interior, remained elusive, explorers in search of fame would need to devise some other form of heroic achievement. It was left to Edward John Eyre to find a new mode of exploration, and a new way of structuring a journal, in order to gain the recognition he craved.

EDWARD JOHN EYRE: *JOURNALS OF EXPEDITIONS OF DISCOVERY*

Oxley was but one explorer who seemed never to comprehend the magnitude of what he achieved simply because it was less than he, the colonial government, and the public had hoped for. This problem, which faced many ambitious explorers, was clearly stated by Edward John Eyre when in 1840 he became aware that his dreams of penetrating north from Adelaide to the centre of the continent would not be realised:

Accustomed to judge of undertakings only by their results, (the public) are frequently as unjust in their censure as they are excessive in their approval. The traveller who discovers a rich and well watered district, encounters but few of the hardships,

and still fewer of the anxieties, that fall to the lot of the explorer in desert regions, yet is the former lauded with praise, whilst the latter is condemned to obloquy; although the success perhaps of the one, or the failure of the other, may have arisen from circumstances over which individually neither had any control.³¹

In order for this latter form of exploration to be appreciated required a new type of understanding; one that valued acts of travel and survival in difficult conditions as major achievements independent of the economic or strategic benefits they could deliver to the empire.

It was Eyre who was to be the precursor to a major shift in the nature of Australian exploration. In 1840 he was presented with a Union Jack by none other than Charles Sturt, with the entreatment that he plant it in the centre of the continent. Adelaide turned out in a cavalcade of farewell to speed Eyre on his journey. It was a difficult and failed attempt, which petered out when the party became ensnared by the dry salt-encrusted beds of Lake Torrens and Lake Eyre. Bitterly disappointed by his failure to reach the centre of the continent, and unable to face an ignominious return to Adelaide, Eyre retreated to Spencer's Gulf and brooded upon the lot of the failed explorer. On his attempt to reach the centre 'neither useful nor valuable discoveries had been made', and he now needed a means of 'making some amends for past failure' (I, 314).

The time Eyre spent at Spencer's Gulf pondering his future was to be a watershed for Australian exploration, in that he devised a new model for exploration. He crafted a plan to repair the damage he believed had been done to his reputation by undertaking a journey to the west, around the Great Australian Bight to the settlement of Albany. Some exploratory probes to the west were sufficient to convince Eyre of the despairing nature of the country that lay in that direction, but he remained adamant, despite the pleading of friends, that the journey must be attempted. He sent the bulk of his

party back to Adelaide, and set out for Albany with only his companion John Baxter, and three young Aboriginals.

Before his departure Eyre wrote to South Australia's Governor Gawler informing him that this remnant expedition would:

encounter a country which I knew to be all but destitute of water, and to consist, for a very great distance, of barren sandy ridges and low lands, covered by an almost impenetrable scrub, at a season too, when but little rain could be expected, and the heat would, in all probability, be intense . . . (I, 179)

At best this journey might prove conclusively that a cattle route between the two colonies was impractical, but Eyre knew it would reveal nothing in the way of the green and fertile lands which had hitherto inspired explorers into the field, and he had neither the resources nor the staff required to use the trip as a means of collecting scientific data.

The real goal of this journey therefore, was the resurrection of Eyre's reputation in the eyes of the colony. Previous explorers had cared passionately about their reputations, but they believed that it was by their discoveries that their place in society and history would be secured. Eyre, however, set out to replace exploration with exploit, and as a result the focus of public interest shifted from the outcome of the exploration to the explorer himself.

The choice by Eyre to attempt the crossing of the Great Australian Bight marked the beginning of not only a new style of Australian exploration, but also the establishment of a second archetype of explorers' writing which would run parallel with, and eventually outlast the classical form of the epic model described by Dixon. Eyre began his journey westward knowing that whatever fame he attracted would be from the acts of travel, endurance and survival rather than discovery. Journeying became an end in itself, and the journal it spawned was constructed not to record the quest for and

attainment of the promised land, but rather to chronicle an heroic struggle against a hostile environment.

In the introduction to his published journal Eyre is careful to set the scene for the disappointment which will be used to justify his later actions. He stresses, by quoting from contemporary newspaper accounts and the texts of various public addresses, the high expectations which were held for the expedition, and he also underlines the personal interest of Governor Gawler in the outcome of the exploration. The farewell address by the Governor is quoted at length and the journal narrates the colourful events as the party departs Adelaide to 'the cheering of the people, the waving of hats, and the rush of so many horses' (I, 21).

Eyre uses other devices early in his narrative to prepare the reader for what is to follow. In the introduction he quotes his own advice, issued prior to his departure on the northern expedition, of the grave difficulties to be encountered from an overland journey to Western Australia ('the scarcity of grass – the denseness of the scrub – and the all but total absence of water' (I, 6)), but knowing at the time of preparing his journal for publication that it is to this very path that he will eventually turn.

The first entry in the journal proper is given over to a consideration of the nature and dangers of exploration as Eyre exchanges the 'crowded drawing room of civilized life' for the 'region as yet unknown, and unvisited save by the savage or the wild beast' (I, 23). In particular he stresses the responsibility the leader assumes not only for the success of the explorations, but also for the safety of his companions.

A single false step, the least error in judgement, or the slightest act of indiscretion might plunge the expedition into inextricable difficulty or danger, or might defeat altogether the object in view. Great indeed was the responsibility . . . (I, 24)

Eyre also elucidates for the first time the theme to which, as we have seen, he will return. That is, his fear that the public will judge his success by results alone, rather than by the endurance, bravery and perseverance that are required even by those explorations that return little in the way of economically useful discoveries.

In the closing lines of this opening passage Eyre acknowledges that the fate of the party rests with 'that Almighty Being . . . to whom we looked for guidance and protection in all our wanderings' (I, 28). Rather than surrendering to God the leader's role as the guiding hand in the outcome of the expedition, however, Eyre is further preparing the reader for the events which will follow. For when fortune does eventually smile upon him, it will be interpreted by the explorer as evidence that, as with all true heroes, he is one of the elect upon whom God has lavished his favour.

The effect of these contrivances is to prepare the reader for the 'failure' of the expedition according to the standards by which such undertakings had hitherto been judged. The northern expedition was difficult and unpromising from the start. The party was constantly short of water, had difficulty in maintaining its horses, was troubled by Aborigines, and tormented by mirages which lured them further into the wastelands. Despite valiant efforts the expedition was repelled by the basin of dry lake beds. Eyre's frustration is evident, and he carefully recreates the journey in such a way that the decision to retreat is presented as the only responsible course of action.

I stood gazing on the dismal prospect before me with feelings of chagrin and gloom . . . the vast area of the lake was before me interminable as far as the eye could see to the northward, and the country upon its shore was desolate and forbidding. (I, 59)

The decision to turn back galls Eyre, and he uses his journal to present a defence of his actions. He discusses at length the impossi-

bility of penetrating the dry lakes, and then pleads his case with the reader, asking 'With such data, and under such circumstances, what other opinion could I possibly arrive at?' (I, 130).

Whatever justifications Eyre made for his decision in hindsight, it did little to ease his mind at the time. The four months he spent on the South Australian coast before commencing his journey to the west were difficult ones for Eyre. Exploratory journeys to the west only confirmed the danger inherent in his new plan, and he wrote several justifications to the Governor of his actions in both retreating from the northern expedition and attempting the westward crossing. By reproducing these letters in his journal, Eyre is again able to impress upon the reader the hopelessness of the situation that had brought him to this point, and to reiterate the dangers that lie ahead.

Eyre's journal entry recording the departure of the new expedition dwells again on his role as an explorer. It is a last chance to defend his actions and set the scene for the harrowing journey that is to follow. Eyre makes the most of it, taking the reader through yet another account of the public expectations held for the northern expedition and a further justification of his decision to retreat. In doing so he clearly states the reason why he must attempt the crossing to Albany.

to have returned (to Adelaide) now would have been . . . to have thrown away the only opportunity presented to me of making some amends for past failure and of endeavouring to justify the confidence that had been reposed in me . . . I considered myself in duty and in honour bound, not to turn back from this attempt, as long as there was the remotest possibility of success, without any regard to considerations of a personal or private nature. (I, 313–314)

Having failed in his attempt to 'discover' the land by either revealing its fertile secrets, or at last penetrating its core, Eyre has

now resolved to confront it directly. This time, he must succeed whatever the cost. Whereas Oxley journeyed in the expectation and hope that he would encounter rewarding landscapes, and constructed his journal to emphasise what little success he did have, Eyre undertakes this trek in the full knowledge that no such landscapes exist to be discovered. Indeed, his purpose will be served by emphasising the very lack of fertile or attractive land. The party is stripped back to a minimum, there are no diversionary explorations in search of better vistas, travelling is often done at night to avoid the heat of the day, and any pretence to scientific observation or recording is dispensed with. Rather than travelling in order to discover new land, Eyre's only goal is to survive an ordeal.

Survival becomes almost the sole topic of the journal. The land is Eyre's enemy, and it is carefully presented in order to highlight its constant dangers. The heat, the cold, the sand, the flies, the harassing vegetation, the lack of water, and the desperate search for food are the only concerns. They collect dew for moisture and survive on horsemeat. Even on the one occasion that Eyre allows himself to comment on the attractiveness of a particular scene, the cliffs of the Great Australian Bight, he does so in a manner which draws attention to its particular danger and the general problems faced by his party.

Distressing and fatal as the continuance of these cliffs might prove to us, there was a grandeur and sublimity in their appearance that was most imposing and which struck me with admiration. Stretching out before us in lofty unbroken outline . . . and glittering in the morning sun which had now risen upon them, and made the scene beautiful even amidst the dangers and anxieties of our situation. (I, 327)

This sense of man engaged in combat with the land is crucial to maintaining interest in the diary. In the absence of any hope of rewarding discoveries and little variation in the topographical fea-

tures with which to structure and pace the text, Eyre involves the reader in his narrative by emphasising the sense of ever present danger being tackled with little more than will and courage.

It is also crucial in maintaining Eyre's heroic role, that he is seen to be 'alone' in his battle against the overpowering elements. Having already dispensed with the majority of his party, and retaining only an overseer and three natives, Eyre then uses the text to further isolate himself. Those who remain with him are given little chance to emerge as personalities or active agents in the narrative. Eyre's assistant John Baxter is never referred to by name, but simply as 'the overseer', and the natives are referred to as 'the boys'. Only one native, Wylie, is eventually referred to by name.

Eyre's companions are further written out of the action, in that the explorer dwells upon their unwillingness to participate in the heroic march. The overseer despairs of completing the desert crossing and tries to persuade Eyre to return to the east, and two of the Aborigines steal supplies and abandon the party, before returning several days later begging forgiveness. In a heroic sense then, Eyre's text constructs him as being genuinely alone; a leader marching his miserable band forward across the perilous landscape.

In an explorer narrative, to which the lack of obvious landmarks and incidents would usually be detrimental, Eyre carefully paces the text in such a way that the few incidents that do occur are carefully plotted in order to maintain the sense of danger, heighten the psychological drama, and further the role of Eyre as hero. The first such incident occurs at a time when the elements themselves seem to portend evil; 'The night was cold, and the wind blowing hard from the south-west, whilst scud and nimbus were passing rapidly by the moon' (I, 401). Eyre is startled by a gunshot and some cries. He hurries to the scene where he finds 'my poor overseer, weltering in his blood, and in the last agonies of death' (I, 402). The two troublesome Aborigines have shot and killed Baxter and absconded with the remaining supplies. With a serial novelist's feel for the drama

of the situation, Eyre structures the text so that this incident, the climax to the horror of this wretched trek, concludes the first volume of his journal.

The second volume commences with this same scene. Eyre's narrative enhances the drama of the moment, again stressing his role as the lone hero locked in a mortal tussle with the elements.

The horrors of my situation glared upon me in such startling reality, as for an instant almost to paralyse the mind. At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable wastes of Australia, with the fierce wind raging in unison with the scene of violence before me, I was left, with a single native, whose fidelity I could not rely upon . . . Three days had passed away since we left the last water, and it was doubtful when we might find any more. Six hundred miles had to be traversed, before I could hope to obtain the slightest aid or assistance of any kind, whilst I knew not that a single drop of water or an ounce of flour had been left by these murderers . . . (II, 1–2)

Although more terrors await Eyre, this is the low point in the narrative, when the land and its native inhabitants seem to have conspired to undo him. He and Wiley plod on in an air of somnambulism, stunned by the murder and constantly surrounded by the 'evils' present in the land itself. Death hovers about them, and Eyre muses that 'I could have sat quietly and contentedly, and let the glass of life glide away to its last sand' (II, 40).

The narrative to this point has also been preparing the way for the second major incident, the point at which Eyre and Wiley are rescued by the French whaler *Mississippi*. Eyre has used his text to nurture the belief that there is a Providence with an interest in his welfare. As he had done at the commencement of the northern expedition, Eyre has begun this journey by invoking,

that Almighty Being who had guided and guarded us hitherto, amidst all our difficulties, and in all our wanderings, and who . . . would undoubtedly order every thing for the best. (I, 306)

Thereafter on those occasions where water is found or danger averted, Eyre does not neglect to point out that they have been rescued by the intervention of the 'merciful Being' or that 'gracious God'. Even the death of Baxter is interpreted as a sign of God's interest, because it could so easily have been the explorer himself had other arrangements been made for the night watch.

Trifling as the arrangement of the watches might seem, and unimportant as I thought it at the time . . . yet was my choice, in this respect, the means under God's providence of my life being saved . . . (I, 401)

Unfortunately, it is not recorded what Baxter thought of 'God's providence' in this matter.

This growing evidence of divine interest in Eyre's fate culminates when the explorer and Wylie are rescued by the *Mississippi*. They are saved from the land in the only way possible, in that they are literally snatched from it and deposited aboard the safety of the vessel. Their rescue comes at the very moment when a change in the weather would otherwise have meant doom. On the night of the rescue Eyre lies awake in his cabin, pondering his change in fortune:

Sincerely grateful to the Almighty for having guided us through so many difficulties, and for the inexpressible relief afforded us when so much needed, but so little expected, I felt doubly thankful for the mercy we experienced, when, as I lay awake, I heard the wind roar, and the rain drive with unusual wildness, and reflected that by God's blessing, we were now in safety, and under shelter from the violence of the storm . . . (II, 69)

Paul Carter has written that the chance encounter with the *Mississippi* is 'an incident that any biographer of heroes is likely to find embarrassing. It risks revealing the arbitrary nature of Eyre's journey, the artificial gravity of the dangers he has exposed himself to'.³² This may be true, but it is the exact effect Eyre has structured his narrative to produce. His heroism lies in his readiness to trust in God and tackle all of the 'arbitrary' dangers that the wilderness might throw at him. Rather than being detrimental to his claims to a hero's status, Eyre uses this as the final proof. His diary contended at the outset that the truest hero was the man who endured despite being denied the conventional discoveries and rewards of exploration, and whose sufferings and privations would in all likelihood be greater because of it, and now he has produced the story to prove it.

After spending a fortnight aboard the *Mississippi* Eyre and Wiley are returned to shore and recommence their journey. They encounter more difficulties, but with their strength renewed they reach Albany safely.

In preparing his diaries for publication Eyre masterfully manipulated the text in such a way that it told his story as he wanted it told. Despite the many horrors that confronted Australian explorers, the murder of Baxter and the rescue by the *Mississippi* remain among the best known incidents. Ross Gibson has contended that the journals of Australia's explorers function in 'a literary territory somewhere between documentary and fiction',³³ and Eyre's account of his journey gives evidence of this. There is, however, little point in trying to decipher the 'truth' of the epic journey. In general Eyre's journal is an undeniably accurate record of events, and an acute account of the explorer's own motives and state of mind.

Eyre's heroic journey is not an 'exploration' in the previously accepted sense. Unlike Oxley and others before him who had attempted to secure the importance of their expedition by willing

themselves into encounters with fertile land, Eyre realised that his reputation would be salvaged by focussing on the very harshness and extremity of the conditions he encountered. In this the hostile wilderness and deceitful Aborigines became his allies and he structured his journal in such a way that it emphasised the worst fears held for the Australian landscape: that large tracts of it were irredeemably hostile to civilized man. By doing so Eyre bypassed the interests of the empire in favour of a narrative which put his own case for a hero's status.

ERNEST GILES: *AUSTRALIA TWICE TRAVERSED*

If Eyre's journey represented a new approach to Australian inland exploration, he can also be seen to be an intermediate step between Oxley and Ernest Giles, the self-proclaimed 'last of the Australian explorers' (*ATT*, II, 342). Giles was responsible for introducing yet another form of exploration to Australia, and in doing so he also developed a third form of explorer's journal.

Giles arrived in the colony in 1850 at the age of fifteen, possessed with an excellent education from which he derived a love for classical learning and not a few literary pretensions. Unable to find a satisfactory position in the cities where his occasionally dissolute habits were regarded with suspicion, Giles increasingly turned to the inland for solace and as a means of gaining the notice he felt due to him. In a career in which he was always to be denied the attention he craved, Giles had his first near taste of fame in 1861 when he almost saved Burke and Wills. It was in the 1870s, however, that he carved out his niche in Australian exploration, in a series of monumental journeys across the western interior of the continent.

With the major exploration of the eastern half of the continent completed, attention had turned to the western half that lay in the area between the Adelaide-Darwin telegraph line and the Indian

Ocean coast. Although hope of finding the longed for fertile interior had all but faded, if it did exist, it could only be in this part of the continent. According to Giles:

There was room for snowy mountains, an inland sea, ancient river, and palmy plain, for races of new kinds of men inhabiting a new and odorous land, for fields of gold and golcondas of gems, for a new flora and a new fauna, and, above all the rest combined, there was room for me! (I, lv)

Giles entered a race of a kind, to be the first to cross this vast expanse. Again fame eluded him. He was second after Peter Egerton Warburton to make the east-west crossing, and second after John Forrest to make the west-east crossing. William Gosse beat him to Mount Olga and to Ayers Rock. A one time gold miner, Giles tramped across the rich alluvial fields of Western Australia without noticing a trace. In making the longest and some of the most harrowing treks in Australian exploration it was his fate to discover little more than the most arid stretches of the continent. In his search for the unfound riches of Australia, he became only the 'chronicler of her poorer regions'.

But Giles persevered. Despite the failure of his earliest expeditions, he found himself drawn back to the task long after any reasonable hope of finding the longed for riches had dissipated. Although Giles was initially driven to exploration by the desire for personal reward and empire expanding discoveries, he became increasingly attracted to the act of exploring itself and the desire to be the first to visit a place, no matter how unattractive and unrewarding it might be.

The wild charm and exciting desire that induce an individual to undertake the arduous tasks that lie before an explorer, and the pleasure and delight of visiting new and totally unknown places,

are only whetted by his first attempt, especially when he is constrained to admit that his first attempt had not resulted in his carrying out its objects. (I, xlviii)

Although he would have preferred to discover useful land, Giles realises that, 'the explorer does not make the country, he must take it as he finds it' (II, 246).

Giles came under the spell of what B. F. de Vries called the 'lure of the wild', that romantic impulse under which 'the unknown, the mysterious, and exotic were deliberately sought and savoured'.³⁴ Whereas Eyre had suffered the wilderness in order to establish his heroic credentials, Giles comes to revel in the challenge that was presented by the desert. Both men endure a trial by wilderness, but whereas Eyre had something to prove to the world, Giles has something to prove to himself.

I represented that we were probably in the worst desert on the face of the earth, but that fact should give us all the more pleasure in conquering it It was of course a desperate thing to do, and I believe very few people would or could rush madly into a totally unknown wilderness, where the nearest known water was 650 miles away. But I had sworn to go to Perth or die in the attempt . . . (II, 186–187)

For Giles the deserts of Australia became a stage on which he could enact his own melodrama. His quest for discovery was intensely personal, and his understanding of himself and his place in the world could only be satisfied by tackling the 'howling wilderness' head on. 'It must be remembered' he wrote, that 'I was pitted, or had pitted myself, against Nature' (II, 52).

One could imagine no other Australian explorer declaring an expedition a 'splendid failure' (I, li), as Giles did after finally achieving his east-west crossing. Having tasted this much 'failure', Giles

acknowledges that 'it might be reasonably supposed that my labours as an explorer would cease, and that I might disband the expedition' (II, 251), but there are other deserts to cross. He almost immediately sets out again to traverse the waste.

That Gibson's Desert existed, well I knew; but how far west from the Rawlinson it actually extended, was the problem I now wished to solve. (II, 252)

At this point there is little reward or even notoriety to be had from attempting this return desert journey. What tempts the explorer is the personal satisfaction born of his desire to travel the trackless waste and to solve a geographic puzzle that interested few others. That, plus the contentment known to 'the wanderer in its wilds [who] may snatch a fearful joy at having once beheld the scenes, that human eyes ought never again to see' (II, 318).

Given that Giles could not report any empire-expanding feats of discovery, but only tales of epic treks and survival under appalling conditions, he was faced when preparing his published account with a challenge similar to that encountered by Eyre. But whereas Eyre's journal is structured in order to render his triumph over the hostile land as being a vindication of his personal qualities, Giles represents his own privations as being the active choice of a man who is entranced by the need to travel and explore for his own satisfaction. It therefore suits his purpose to demonstrate a far greater awareness of the interaction between the explorer and the physical environment. That is, not only will the explorer be a catalyst for the process whereby the land is changed, but the explorer himself will be shown to be changed by his encounter with the land. Whereas the psychic and even metaphysical impact of desert exploration is hinted at in a number of the published explorer journals, they find their fullest expression in the writing of Giles.

In the most complete account of his many travels, *Australia Twice*

Traversed, Giles provides an introduction which presents an overview of the explorations which preceded his own, and indicates that he was aware that he was as much a part of a literary/ imaginative tradition, as an exploratory tradition.

No works of fiction can excel, or indeed equal, in romantic and heart-stirring interest the volumes, worthy to be written in letters of gold, which record the deeds and the sufferings of these noble toilers in the dim and distant field of discovery afforded by the Australasian continent. . . . imaginary tales of adventure which, while they appeal to no real sentiment, and convey no solid information, cannot compete for a moment with those sublime records of what has been dared, done, and suffered, at the call of duty, and for the sake of human interests by men who really lived and died. (I, xxxvi)

Giles believes that the explorer's reputation is made as much by his journals as by his journeys. He is also pointing in the direction in which his own claims to greatness will lie; that is, towards those who have 'dared, done, and suffered', rather than those who have 'discovered' in the traditional sense. Giles subtitled his journal *The Romance of Exploration*, and explained that the 'romance is in the chivalry of the achievement of difficult and dangerous, if not almost impossible, tasks' (II, 342). This is hardly a sentiment that would have occurred to an earlier generation of Australian explorers, to whom the romance of exploration lay in the prospect of finding fertile valleys or rich plains over the next hill, or to Eyre, to whom 'romance' was the sound of his own name echoing through the corridors of influence. As with Eyre, Giles bemoans the fact that the honour and financial rewards are given to those who have the comparatively easy task of discovering and travelling over fertile regions, but he is unabashed at his own lack of success in this regard. The penetration of the deserts, Giles argues, still must 'have its value, both in a commercial and geographic sense' (II, 247).

In order to de-emphasise the importance of the discovery of productive land and exciting topographical features as the measure of success, Giles presents his journals in a new form. The day-by-day diary format favoured since Oxley, is replaced by a far less structured form in which each chapter accounts for a stage of the expedition. Although the narrative remains basically chronological, the author has greater freedom to omit passages of uninteresting travel, to condense time and incidents, to indulge his inclination for philosophical asides, and to generally massage the narrative in a manner which was not possible while it purported to be a near copy of the field diaries.

This form also gives Giles licence to express his bent for literary inventiveness and playfulness. He has included numerous quotes from various poets to enliven his text, and added other snatches of poetry from his own hand. He has even indulged his liking for rhyme by allowing it to pass into his prose:

though I often walked up the glen I could never discover what sort of bird it was. It might have been a raven; yes, a raven never flitting may be sitting, may be sitting, on those shattered rocks of wretchedness – on that Troglodytes' shore, where in spirit I might wander, o'er those arid regions yonder; but where I wish to squander, time and energies no more. Though a most romantic region, its toils and dangers legion, my memory oft besieging, what time cannot restore. (II, 262–263)

Giles is also alone amongst Australian explorers – with the exception of Warburton – in that he occasionally attempts to inject some humour into his narrative.

On reaching the camp, Gibson and Jimmy had shot some parrots and other birds, which must have flown down the barrels of their guns, otherwise they could never have hit them. (II, 170)

All of this adds to the sense of the act of exploring being an intellectual as well as a physical journey, in which the explorer discovers himself at the same time as he discovers the land. As Giles asks his readers, 'am I to be blamed if I have occasionally mixed up my narrative with an odd remark, anecdote, or imaginative idea?' (II, 340).

The difference in temperament from that exhibited in Eyre's journal is also apparent in those passages which Giles makes the centrepiece of his narrative. Whereas Eyre has structured his journal in order to draw the maximum dramatic impact from those incidents which punctuated his trek; many of the most memorable passages in Giles' journal involve virtually no overt 'incident' or action at all. In a series of remarkable reveries, without precedent in the explorers' journals, Giles records his meditations about a range of issues. Death, God, and the relationship between deserts and humanity are recurring themes.

Thoughts of death and the afterlife, in particular, haunt Giles, for he is aware that 'even the paths of glory lead but to the grave' (II, 118). He even apologises for his interest in the subject, which he believes is induced by the environment and his circumstances:

my reflections . . . of a necessity assumed a gloomy tinge, although I am the least gloomy-minded of the human race, for we know that the tone of the mind is in a great measure sympathetic with the physical condition of the body . . . The mind is forced back upon itself and becomes filled with an endless chain of thoughts which wander through the vastness of the star-bespangled spheres . . . From my heated couch of sandy earth I gazed helplessly but rapturously upon them, wondering at the enormity of occupied and unoccupied space, revolving thoughts of past, present, and future existences, and of how all that is earthly fadeth away. (II, 117–118)

And so begins a musing on what it is like to have 'passed through the portals of the valley of death'.

In such sequences the deserts continue to be seen as an enemy that must be fought and conquered, but they are also represented as a unique landscape which can be approached with a willingness to learn from them. To Giles, the 'great desert . . . must suggest to the reflecting mind either God's perfectly effected purpose, or His purposely effected neglect' (II, 227). And although he delivers a blow to the empire-expanders with his belief that 'it seems to be intended by the great Creator that civilised beings should never re-enter here' (II, 228), he does so without personal disappointment. To Giles, these desert places are complete unto themselves.

One of the most significant of Giles's reveries culminates in a dream in which he is visited by a 'heavenly choir', singing a song indicating to the explorer the importance and magnitude of the task he has set himself, and promising that by the exploration of deserts he may yet transcend death and receive a glimpse of God's greater plans.

'Be bold of heart, be strong of will, for unto thee by God is given,
to roam the desert paths of earth, and thence explore the fields of
heaven. Be bold of heart, be strong of will, and naught on earth
shall lay thee low.' (II, 154–155)

Cavan Brown called this moment 'the transitional point between the stage of exploration and enculturation';³⁵ the moment at which the appropriation of Australia changes from the need to chart and map physical features to the need to understand and reflect upon its less obvious meanings. Giles has commenced his explorations with a desire to find fertility and abundance, but in the process he has been changed to the point where he is prepared to embrace the desert places of the continent for their own unique rewards.

Although inland exploration would continue into the twentieth century the golden era of the compass and the theodolite had all but passed with Giles. As he had indicated, if Australians were to further their understanding of their difficult land, they would now need to rely upon the words, symbols, ideas and myths which were capable of expressing and furthering an appreciation of not only what the land looked like, but more importantly what it meant to its non-Aboriginal inhabitants.

* * *

The status of the explorers' journals and their place in Australian literature have varied over the years. H. M. Green, in *A History of Australian Literature* was ambivalent about their importance but acknowledged that,

Australia's greatest explorers have mostly possessed, in varying degrees and kinds, some literary gift, [and] between them they contributed to the literature of the period a considerable body of descriptive prose.³⁶

Later analyses of the journals have looked beyond their role as 'descriptive prose', and examined them as texts which perform many of the functions common to more imaginative forms of writing, and which therefore gives them a value distinct from their merit as historical documents. Robert Sellick wrote that:

The journals become a significant body of writing, remarkable not only for the wealth of practical information they convey but also for the way they recreate the experience of exploration and discovery. Behind this recreation there is a shaping and ordering, an imaginative power at work.³⁷

Sellick's opinion that this is 'a body of writing that demands to be considered as literature'³⁸, has been echoed by Ross Gibson who concluded that 'these works ought to be analysed as effective imaginative literature . . . which contained literary characters, plots, themes and even symbols'.³⁹

In particular, it was by charting the gap between the imperial dreams and their own harsh experiences that the explorers' journals acquired their deep and lasting hold upon the mythopoeic aspects of the Australian consciousness. The journals capture, often with remarkable clarity and immediacy, those very moments when Europeans came face-to-face with the reality that the last of lands would deny the empire the fulfilment of its dreams. Singly, the journals of Oxley, Eyre, Giles and other inland explorers, articulate the experience of individuals coming to terms with reduced expectations; collectively, they record milestones in the process by which the empire and the settler society abandoned their common hopes for the inland and confined their dreams – at least temporarily – to the continental margins.

In these ways the explorers signalled that the physical and metaphysical occupation of Australia would be a slow and hesitant experience. They permanently changed the way in which the Australian land and the possibilities for life on the continent were understood by its non-Aboriginal inhabitants; not only because their travel and their journals heralded the arrival of a new culture, but because what they wrote changed how those who were to follow them imagined and saw the land.

The explorers' experiences were a sure indicator that the very 'destiny' they were intended to initiate, the founding of a continental empire that encompassed the breadth of the Australian landmass, would not eventuate. Inland Australia was marked as a difficult space which granted few concessions to European ideals of a habitable landscape, and as such it disrupted conceptions of how individuals related to the space and environment they occupied. It was apparent

that the land would need ongoing 'exploration' and 'discovery' as successive generations of Australians struggled to integrate its appearance and its meanings with their idea of themselves and their place in the world. But when Australians did re-address themselves to these issues, they would find in the facts, stories, myths and literature of the inland explorers, the legacy of those individuals who had gone before them.

CHAPTER 2

THE EVOLVING LITERATURE OF AUSTRALIAN EXPLORATION

Ernest Giles completed his last great trek through the Australian interior in 1876, and in 1889 he closed his journal by declaring that he was the 'the last of the Australian explorers' (*ATT*, II, 342). Giles was, however, premature in bringing the age of Australian exploration to a close. The title of 'the last of the Australian explorers' belongs more rightly to David Carnegie, who undertook an epic south-north double crossing of the Western Australian deserts in 1896 and 1897. Carnegie's journey also produced the last classic of Australian inland exploration, *Spinifex and Sand*.⁴⁰

Government and public interest in exploration waned as they came to understand what Eyre, Sturt, Stuart, Giles and others had seen for themselves; that by-and-large the vast central reaches of the continent were unsuited to intensive agriculture, and therefore of little immediate interest to the colonies. Those explorers who persevered found that government support was harder to come by and that the public no longer turned out in great numbers to farewell or welcome back the desert wanderers. When Carnegie and his party completed their return from the Kimberleys, thereby becoming the first Europeans to travel a large area of Western Australia, their feat received little public recognition and no government reward. Carnegie left the colony soon after, an embittered man.

The loss of interest in exploration was accompanied by a decline of status for explorers as heroes in the Antipodean pantheon. According to Manning Clark:

At the end of the nineteenth century, one section of Australian society swung against veneration of the explorers as national heroes . . . Those brave men who had endured the hardships of the Australian wilderness were put up for examination and found wanting . . . They had modelled themselves on the English governing classes: they had put on airs, affected a la-di-da manner, and spoken in a prissy way.⁴¹

Part of the case against the explorers was based on the evidence of their published journals. With their exaggerated concern for extending the interests of an increasingly foreign government and an often self-consciously educated and erudite tone, the journals were at odds with the nationalistic and egalitarian fervour of late nineteenth century Australia. The emerging heroes were bushrangers, bush poets, discoverers of gold, and a new breed of politicians who refused to 'dip their lid' to the ruling class of colonial Australia.

Despite this adjustment of their status and the adoption of new heroes during the twentieth century, Australian explorers have continued to occupy a significant place in the national imagination. In part the explorer has remained an important element by which Australians construct their relationship with their land because of the ongoing place of the history of exploration in school curricula. For generations of Australian school children, the dotted lines of exploration around, into, and eventually across the interior were the means by which they learnt both the history and geography of their island continent. As Jill Ker Conway has recalled of her 1940s schooling:

All we were taught of Australian history was the story of the exploration of Australia, mostly a sad tale of headstrong efforts to

cross trackless deserts, missed rendezvous, death from thirst or starvation . . .⁴²

The stories of discovery and heroism went hand-in-hand with images of vast expanses of wasteland, searing deserts and lakes of salt. In this way the explorers continued to help Australians achieve a sense of the space and place in which they live.

Another major element in the continuing presence of the explorer in the national imagination has been the ongoing literature of Australian exploration. In part this has been a continuation of a form of the explorer's journal, as exploration on a reduced scale continued sporadically into the twentieth century. There remained areas of the continent which had not been adequately recorded and described, and which therefore continued to attract geographic and scientific interest. Beginning in 1891 with the Elder Scientific Exploring Expedition, well financed scientific and anthropological expeditions travelled into areas of the continent that had never in some cases been visited previously by non-Aboriginals. They returned to publish accounts of their experiences which continued to add to the knowledge about the geographical character of the continent. These accounts mostly lack the dramatic impact of the earlier explorers' journals, due to the more realistic expectations that accompanied the later expeditions, the foreknowledge about the nature of the terrain they would traverse, and the improved reliability of equipment and supplies. They nevertheless fed the remnant interest in the centre of the continent and extended a form of explorer literature into the twentieth century.

Intrepid travellers, as distinct from explorers or scientists, also began to visit the inland regions, and often did so with the intention of gathering material for the publication of adventure-travel books. These accounts of the interior continued a form of armchair exploration for readers whose lives were confined to the coastal edge. Notable later accounts include J. W. Gregory's *The Dead Heart of*

Australia (1906), A. G. Bolam's *The Trans-Australian Wonderland* (1923), Michael Terry's *Across Unknown Australia* (1925), and C. T. Madigan's *Crossing the Dead Heart* (1946).⁴³

These accounts were important in that they were written by careful observers with an affection for inland landscapes, who saw the land, its native people and its products quite differently from the harassed and desperate explorers. Given the benefit of a more settled existence and basic comforts, they were able to observe the variety and particular beauty of the inland deserts. From such accounts, Australians began to appreciate that areas that had seemed to be waste could nonetheless sustain a variety of plants and wildlife, and exhibit a wider palette of mood and temperament than had previously been thought.

One effect of these various accounts of the Australian interior was to continue to give life to the deeds and writings of the earlier generation of explorers. Scientists and travellers were aware that they were following paths that had been trodden and written about previously, and they often used these earlier travels and journals to provide the context for their own accounts of the interior. They frequently measured their progress by 'reading' the landscape that had been created by the original explorers in the topographic features they had described, the names they had given to these places, and the physical marks they had left on the land.

A continuation of this form of publication is found in Nicolas Rothwell's *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (2003).⁴⁴ The book recounts Rothwell's several journeys into the interior as he seeks out key landmarks associated with expeditions led by Leichhardt, Sturt and Giles. Immersed in their journals, Rothwell's real interest is not so much in the physical landscapes described in the journals as their record of the psychic impact of the inland on the explorers. Against this Rothwell measures his own fascination with these desert environments.

There has also arisen the phenomenon of 'exploration' being

undertaken as a search for those signs which remain of the original expeditions. Expeditions have been mounted in order to follow the paths of explorers as closely as possible and sometimes attempting to duplicate the conditions under which the original journey was undertaken. The purpose of the exploration is not only the encounter with the land, but to reach an understanding of the lives of those explorers who had previously travelled that same land. The primary source used in reconstructing the routes and circumstances of the previous expeditions are the field notes, journals, and maps left by the explorers. These later expeditions have in turn given rise to a small body of literature in which the experience is recounted as a latter-day explorer's journal. Examples include Tom Bergin's *In the Steps of Burke and Wills* (1981), Edward Stokes's *The Desert Coast: Edward Eyre's Expedition, 1840–41* (1993) and Kieran Kelly's *Hard Country, Hard Men: In the Footsteps of Gregory* (2000).⁴⁵

A related style of publication is that which recounts the tale of a particular expedition. The Burke and Wills expedition has been most often treated in this manner. In particular, Frank Clune's *Dig* (1937) and Alan Moorehead's *Cooper's Creek* (1963)⁴⁶ reached large audiences and have been frequently reprinted. Despite – or perhaps because of – its flawed conception and tragic execution, the Burke and Wills expedition, more than any other, has been the source of explorer-generated myth. Its ongoing appeal to the Australian imagination and the need for successive generations to retell the story – most recently in Sarah Murgatroyd's *The Dig Tree* (2002)⁴⁷ – is testimony to the fear and awe which still attends the nation's contemplation of the inland.

Another field of related publication has been, not unexpectedly, biographical studies of explorers. Most of the major explorers have been afforded at least one full length study. Some of these have bordered on hagiography, but the Australian reading public has come to expect more sophisticated analyses of the explorers and their role in the public life of the emerging nation. The titles of volumes such

as Geoffrey Dutton's *The Hero as Murderer: the Life of Edward John Eyre*, and Edgar Beale's *Sturt: the Chipped Idol*⁴⁸ indicate the clear-eyed reappraisal which has been undertaken of these men and their abilities.

The position of the explorer in the national psyche has also had to withstand the development of new modes of historical study and analysis which have shifted the emphasis away from the focus on the place of government and the expansion of empire which had previously ensured that the explorers retained the interest of both historians and the public. In particular, emerging emphasis on Aboriginal history and the process of dispossession has had the effect of recasting the role of the explorers in such a way that they are now frequently viewed not only as the vanguard of an expanding civilization, but also as the pall-bearers to another, and perhaps more legitimate, Australian society. Control of the public reception of explorers has become another battleground in the ongoing war over the validity of the European occupation of the continent.

Indeed this contention over the role of the explorers has served to increase the interest in their place in Australian history and literature. It has also had the effect of redirecting attention from the lives of the explorers towards an examination of the texts they left behind. Whereas previously the journals had been used by biographers in order to help reconstruct the chronology, incidents and discoveries made in the course of the expeditions, they are now scoured for what they reveal of the processes by which the land was travelled, signified and brought within the purview of the empire. The founding text in this regard is Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1960).⁴⁹ Smith was at his strongest dealing with pictorial representations of the European contact with the Pacific, and he was more interested in the maritime than the land-based exploration. His influence, however, has been ongoing as scholars have turned their attention to analysing the pictorial and written accounts describing European contact with inland Australia.

Major contributions include Ross Gibson's *The Diminishing Paradise* (1984), Robert Dixon's *The Course of Empire* (1986), Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), Cavan Brown's *Pilgrim Through this Barren Land* (1991), Simon Ryan's *The Cartographic Eye* (1996), and Roslynn Haynes' *Seeking the Centre* (1998).

To date the explorers' journals have proven to be capable of tolerating a number of variant readings, and the protomyths derived from these accounts of the initial European encounters with the land have been resilient to the extent that they have both survived and accrued added resonance. Despite the judgement made by Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra that, 'The remorseless appropriation of the image of the explorer by ideologues of legitimisation has left it without force or appeal',⁵⁰ there is considerable evidence to the contrary. The image of the explorer has not been contained by the simply scripted messages of those who wish to legitimise the colonial experience, and neither has its appeal been dismissed from the Australian consciousness.

The explorer and the image he generates are now too complex to ever be convincingly annexed by a single point of view. The linking of explorers with narratives of appropriation and legitimisation has remained understandably strong, and Hodge and Mishra are correct that the explorer-figure *would* have lost its appeal if the explorer was understood as being no more than a tool of imperial ambition. The ongoing and evolving interest in the historical and mythical presence of explorers in the Australian imagination can only be understood, however, by acknowledging the contradictory elements present in their narratives. These elements did include the desire to serve as foot-soldiers of the empire, but also encompassed personal ambitions in the form of fame and wealth, and eventually expanded to encompass a grand desire to understand the true nature of the place they were exploring and the implications of their presence. The explorers retain their interest precisely because their motives and role were far more complex than simply being servants of the empire.

The demand for explorer-related material has been such that a number of ur-texts related to various expeditions have also been published. These have included such items as Charles Sturt's letters from the field to his wife; Edward Eyre's account of exploratory forays undertaken in South Australia in preparation for his attempt to reach central Australia; Ludwig Leichhardt's journals written while at Port Essington at the completion of his overland trek, and then while on the return journey to Sydney;⁵¹ and accounts of expeditions taken from the notes and diaries of subordinates to the leaders. These publications have had the effect of enhancing the understanding of the explorers and the nature of their achievement. In particular they further complicate the matter of ascribing one simple or unequivocal reading to the explorers' journals. These texts, written without the desire to shape public opinion or create a permanent record of the explorer's role in expanding the empire, reveal more of the uncertainties and contradictions which underwrote the imperial adventure. They present a range of voices, reminding readers that not only did the explorers demonstrate a variety of motive and opinion regarding their contact with the land, but that their published journals were frequently constructed so as to inspire confidence in the imperial enterprise, whereas uncertainty and misadventure often prevailed.

EMPIRE IN PERIL: THE LOST LEMURIAN EXPLORERS

Australian exploration has not only inspired a significant output of non-fiction writing over the years, but it has also been important to more imaginative literature. As Robert Sellick and Roslynn Haynes have demonstrated there has accumulated a considerable body of drama and poetry inspired by the deeds of the explorers. There is also a growing body of fiction that has been influenced by the facts and myths of the exploration of the continent.

This fiction first began to emerge in the final days of the major

period of Australian exploration. The late nineteenth century saw a surge in the output of romantic fiction involving the exploration of the new world. Many of these adventure romances followed a formulaic plot, the key elements of which were a group of white explorers, a journey across daunting terrain in a foreign land, hostile (and usually cannibal) black tribes often showing evidence of a formerly great civilization in decline, and an ultimate treasure in the form of gold or precious stones.

Australia was fertile ground for narratives of this type. The continent contained all of the major requirements in that it had a vast and partly explored interior, native tribes with a recent history of clashes with white explorers, and gold deposits located in remote reaches of the country. In their Australian context these romance narratives have been referred to as 'Lemurian novels', a reference to the prehistoric continent of Lemuria which purportedly reached from Madagascar to Malaysia and incorporated Australia, and was supposedly the home to lost civilizations.⁵² The earliest of the Lemurian novels was John Boyle O'Reilly's *Moondyne: a Story of Western Australia* (1879),⁵³ and they continued to be published throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian years.

The most obvious way in which the Lemurian novels drew upon the facts and myths of Australian exploration is that the heroes were often explorers. These were not, however, explorers of the type who were most common in Australia – that is, participants in generously equipped expeditions funded by government or hopeful entrepreneurs. The Lemurian explorers were adventurers, set on escaping tired and careworn circumstances in search of the space and opportunity offered in the colonies, and they are driven by the search for individual reward in the form of mineral wealth rather than the desire to promote the interests of the empire. In Alexander MacDonald's *The Lost Explorers*,⁵⁴ the young Robert Wentworth exhorts his colleague Jack Armstrong to leave England and join him on a journey to Australia:

'The fact is,' he added . . . 'this country is too crowded for us, and too old. Everything is standardized so accurately that we are little more than machines; and we must exist on our paltry pittances, seeing nothing but grime and smoke and rain and fogs, until we become old and brain-sodden, with never a hope beyond the morrow.' (12)

The Lemurian explorers may have been suspicious of the current state of the old forms of the empire, but they were also ambivalent about its future in the new world. For while the Lemurian novels continued the speculation about the interior of the southern continent found in the utopian tracts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they did so with expectations soured by the revelations of nineteenth century exploration.

The Lemurian explorers invariably encounter alien landscapes peopled by lost Aboriginal tribes in decline. These failed civilizations, such as the mountain tribe of *The Lost Explorers*, the Warlattas in Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, the Lemurians in George Firth Scott's *The Last Lemurian*, and the Maluans in J. F. Hogan's *The Lost Explorer*,⁵⁵ are a measure of the disappointment felt by the supporters of the empire when they realised that their hopes for expanding into the Australian interior would not be fulfilled. If on one hand the declining state of these tribes invites occupation of their homeland, on the other it is a reminder of the regressive fate of both individuals and civilizations in the Australian interior.

Robert Dixon has argued that the treatment of these lost tribes captured a 'uniquely colonial identity crisis' which highlighted the 'ambivalent racial and cultural identity' of a colonial Australia 'caught between a lost origin and an undefined future'.⁵⁶ The representation of Aboriginals in the Lemurian novels is symptomatic of a continued doubt as to the value of establishing outposts of empire in such a hostile environment, and questions the value of exploration of these lands for any more than the benefits which can be extracted from

their mineral wealth.

Even the discovery of minerals, however, is a qualified blessing in the Lemurian novel. For although gold and gemstones are found in abundance, the explorers often have no way of quarrying their discoveries or carrying them back to civilization. The explorers in *The Lost Explorers*, *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, W. Carlton Dawe's *The Golden Lake*, and Henri Louis Grin's *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont*,⁵⁷ are all forced to leave behind the vast supplies of gold they have discovered. Once again, the centre of the continent refuses to yield its riches.

Another plot device common to the Lemurian novels is that of the 'lost explorer', the search for who leads a subsequent exploring party into contact with the hostile interior and its native inhabitants. These lost explorers were a further reflection of the souring of the imperial dreams which had been held for the interior, and further encapsulated the hesitant appropriation of colonial space. In some instances, for example Leonard Louvain in *The Lost Explorer* and Richard Bentley in *The Lost Explorers*, the explorers who form the object of the search are entirely fictitious, while at other times the Lemurian authors chose to add a gloss of fiction to the stories of explorers who were genuinely lost in the Australian deserts.

In *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, Ernest Favenc follows the fortunes of a small exploratory party who go in search of a rumoured 'burning mountain', although as they plan the journey one of the party announces that 'We surely ought to find something . . . [even] if it's only the remains of Leichhardt' (14). They do not find the missing explorer or his remains, but they do encounter Murphy, a lone survivor of the Leichhardt expedition. Before he too expires, Murphy manages to give the explorers the diary kept by another of Leichhardt's party, Stuart. A substantial portion of the second half of the novel is taken up with the contents of Stuart's journal. The latter-day explorers learn of the fate of Leichhardt and his expedition, and the journal also serves as a guide as they attempt to reach the

burning mountain and a large deposit of gold. The diary eventually leads them to Stuart's own grave, wherein they locate the closing pages from his diary, which are also reproduced in the novel.

Henry Grin's *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont* is a somewhat bizarre adjunct to the Lemurian genre. It was published with de Rougemont named as the author, and purports to be the true account of his thirty years stranded in Australia during which time he roams over vast expanses of the continent. Grin also draws upon the story of Leichhardt as his exemplar of the lost explorer. Among the many fantastic adventures experienced by de Rougemont, he comes across a number of traces of Leichhardt. He finds a tree inscribed by the explorer (160); discovers a cairn marked with his initials (299); and he is offered as a wife a half-caste girl whom he believes to be Leichhardt's child (301). De Rougemont's final link with Leichhardt is suggested when he recounts that,

In the course of my numerous journeys abroad I blazed or marked a great number of trees; my usual mark being an oval, in or underneath which I generally carved the letter 'L'. (323)

Trees bearing the 'L' mark have been reported from a number of places in north-west Australia, and are often cited as evidence of the passage of Leichhardt's lost expedition. In claiming that these markers may in fact record de Rougemont's travel in the same area, Grin uses the Leichhardt legend to add some verisimilitude to his otherwise fantastic tale, whilst also appropriating one of the methodologies of exploration in order to represent his own hero as an explorer.

At the time he is supposedly stranded in Australia, however, de Rougemont has no knowledge of Leichhardt or his lost expedition. Therefore in order to reconstruct the circumstances of Leichhardt's disappearance for the reader, Grin interposes into the text of de Rougemont's journey passages from Ernest Giles' journal, *Australia Twice Traversed*, in which Giles ponders on the fate of Leichhardt.

This has the effect of rendering de Rougemont and Giles as co-mourners for a lost companion, and aids Grin in the construction of his own text as being a form of explorer's journal.

It becomes apparent that on his eventual return to civilization de Rougemont would have had good cause to read Giles's journal. During the course of his wanderings he is almost saved at one point when he encounters four mounted white men. Although he does not know it at the time, he later discovers that this was one of the Giles expeditions of the early 1870s. De Rougemont's links with Giles are further enhanced when some time later he finds a crazed white man wandering the desert. This lost explorer lives with de Rougemont for two years before his death, but he becomes lucid only in his final days.

He asked me to carry him outside into the sun, and I did so, afterwards squatting down beside him and opening up another conversation. *He then told me his name was Gibson, and that he had been a member of the Giles expedition of 1874.* From that moment I never left him night or day. (304)⁵⁸

De Rougemont supposedly has no knowledge of Giles and his explorations at this point. He therefore briefly recounts the version of the story given by Gibson as to how he came to be lost in the desert, and then supports this with another lengthy quotation from Giles's own account as published in the explorer's journal. As he did with Leichhardt, by borrowing from the story of Gibson and Giles, Grin has appropriated elements from the true record of exploration and depended upon the authority of a well known explorer's journal in order to support the 'truth' of his own account.

The story of the trees marked by Leichhardt also appears in Dawe's *The Golden Lake*. This novel provides a variation on the lost explorer theme, in that the individual at the centre of the quest is a young woman who has been living in the desert for

some fifteen years. A party set out to locate her and encounter on their travels a tree marked 'L 1849'. When digging in the vicinity of the tree they unearth a skull which they presume to be that of the missing explorer. At other points of the novel Dawe also makes reference to his hero's familiarity with the explorations of Warburton, Forrest and Eyre.

Lemurian novelists also called upon their knowledge of the writings of the explorers in order to support their tales regarding the existence of a lost race. Of particular importance in this regard was George Grey's discovery of rock paintings and carvings of human figures in the north-west in 1839. A number of these figures were portrayed wearing clothing and adornments seemingly unknown to the Aborigines of the area. Grey's journal described and illustrated these paintings in great detail. He concluded that the paintings were of uneven quality, but that some were 'far superior to what a savage race could be supposed capable of executing' (*JTED*, I, 206). Grey's reporting of these figures created much interest and led to conjecture that the area had been occupied previously by a superior race.

In *The Lost Explorer*, J. F. Hogan drew upon Grey's discoveries and his speculations in order to support his rendering of the civilization of the lost tribe of the Maluans.

Sir George was wiser than he knew . . . ; had he struck the oasis of Malua, been allowed to enter the Queen's Palace, and feast his eyes on the splendid specimens of native art that we were now beholding, any doubt he might previously have entertained would have become a conviction like mine. (140)

Ernest Favenc also made reference to Grey's discovery in *The Secret of the Australian Desert*, in which the journal of the dead explorer Stuart contains a reference to a rock painting he has encountered.

I started with affright, for partly overhead and partly confronting me was a strange gigantic shape with outstretched hand . . . It bore no resemblance to the ordinary crude tracings of the natives. (99)

When Favenc's latter-day explorers Brown and Morton follow the directions given in Stuart's diary they too encounter the drawing, and reach the same conclusion that, 'it was not the work of any Australian aborigines then existing on the continent' (132). Favenc reveals in his preface to the novel that Grey's journals were the source for his own Lemurian conjectures.

Another unexplained riddle I have introduced points to the possible early occupation of Australia by an ancient and partly civilized race. In 1838, Lieutenant, now Sir George Grey discovered some remarkable paintings in a cave on the Glenelg River, evidently not the work of the present inhabitants . . . (iv-v)

Writers of imperial romances therefore played a part in fostering continued interest in explorers and the history of the exploration of the interior of the continent. They not only represented fictional explorers finding adventure, hardship, troublesome Aborigines and the possibility of great riches in the interior; but they also pointed directly to the discoveries and circumstances of the real explorers of the continent, and used explorer's journal as both a plot device and a narrative form.

The Lemurian novels reflected the changing attitudes towards the interior of the continent. Although it was still constructed as a vast and challenging blank, it was now portrayed as being territory for the seekers of exotic adventures and sudden wealth rather than a possible site for long term settlement and occupation. The heart of the continent remained the province of 'lost' explorers, cannibal tribes, and trackless deserts.

With such foreboding signs the question of introducing

'civilization' into this inland void remained on hold. Although the young men of the empire were being lured to Australia by the promise of freedom and adventure, they were at the same time warned of the dangers of a land that remained only partly mapped. The reading audience was enticed by the prospects of the rising empire as it encountered new lands, but warned of the manifold dangers which might yet prevent the fulfilment of the promise.

ENGLISHMEN IN THE BUSH:

E. L. GRANT WATSON AND D. H. LAWRENCE

The Lemurian novels had no immediate successors in their portrayal of the explorer as hero. Remnants of the explorer type were frequently evident, however, in a number of novels from between the wars which addressed the issue of establishing and maintaining a relationship with the land. Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo*, Brian Penton's *The Landtakers*, Miles Franklin's *All That Swagger*, Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, and Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers*⁵⁹ were but some of a group of novels which took a dispassionate look at attempts to come to term with life in the bush and the often troubled relationships between the settlers and the Aborigines. These realist novels examined the effect of the environment on the new inhabitants, and there is a constant tension between the settlers and the land they would inhabit. Even if the characters are encountering these landscapes as settlers rather than explorers they still find in them the explorer's sense of discovery and opportunity. As Danny Delacy looks out across the 'great plains' in *All That Swagger*, he sees that:

There for the dreamers, the path-finders, the road-makers with the forcefulness to project their personality upon the environment, lay a world inviting light-hearted effort and glamorous deeds. (56)

As a group, however, Australian novels of the first half of the century described the struggle between the land and character in terms of physical effects, while the metaphysical implications of the conflict remained largely unexamined. They stopped short of exploring what Brian Elliott has described as the 'subtler enquiries'; of asking 'what spiritual and emotional qualities does such a people develop in such an environment? In what way do the forces of nature impinge upon the imagination? How do aesthetic evaluations grow?'⁶⁰

Australian writers were not, however, without a nascent understanding of the metaphysical impact of living with an environment such as the Australian bush and desert. Inland traveller and war historian C. E. W. Bean understood that Australians would never be really at home in this continent until such time as they came to terms with the harsher aspects of its landscape.

The Australian, one hundred or two hundred years hence, will still live with the consciousness that if he only goes far enough over the hills and across the plains, he comes in the end to the mysterious half desert country . . . And the life of that mysterious country will affect the Australian imagination as the life of the sea has affected that of the English.⁶¹

And in *Such is Life* Joseph Furphy had Tom Collins ponder on 'the monotonous variety of this interminable scrub . . . so grave, subdued, self-centred', and ask the question, 'what is the latent meaning of it all?'⁶²

As Bean and Furphy realised, while the land was understood to be 'mysterious' and 'self-centred', the onus was on those who would occupy it to address themselves to the task of interpreting the signs they found there. Even if Australians were to turn their back on the inland and locate themselves in more hospitable realms, the central reaches of the continent would remain stoically present and gazing

over their shoulder, immovable and imperturbable.

When the explorer figure did eventually re-emerge in Australian fiction, his quest would be directed not in search of the physical realities of the continent, but in trying to comprehend the 'latent meaning' in the land and landscapes and how it effected the lives of Australians. In the meantime, however, it was a measure of the still embryonic understanding Australians had of their bush and the desert environments, that when such enquiries were made, it was by European visitors responding to the shock of sudden exposure to alien landscapes.

London biologist-turned-novelist E. L. Grant Watson made only two brief visits to Western Australia in 1910–1911, during which he travelled to remote areas of the north-west deserts. These visits had a lasting impact on Watson. He developed an interest in the mystical power of the desert, and six of the eleven novels he wrote subsequently are set in the remote and barren areas of the country. He was also influenced by both Joseph Conrad and Jungian philosophy, and he saw his journey into the Australian desert as a voyage of inner discovery.

The power of the desert environment in Watson's novels is born of its size, emptiness and indifference, the impact of which is barely moderated by its evanescent beauty. His descriptions of the inland often retain the same sense of shock and exclusion which marked the explorers' reactions. Watson's characters understand what some explorers eventually acknowledged, that travelling over this land is not the same thing as exploring it. The land will not readily reveal its meanings, and it resists attempts to impose foreign systems of understanding and order upon its alien surface.

The fringes trembled in the light, warm wind, and behind, in what remained mysterious and unknown, the stillness of the deserted land brooded its inner secrets . . . The trees along the river-bed appeared so still and enchanted that they gave the

impression that they had grown there since the beginning, and would remain for always, blue, thin-leaved, brittle, self-expressive, centred in their own being.⁶³

Some of Watson's more sensitive characters, such as Martin O'Brian, who appears in both *The Desert Horizon* and *Daimon*, realise that as strangers to this landscape they struggle not only to ensure their physical survival but also to adjust their conception of the world and accommodate an environment in which many old certainties and values no longer apply. At other times they are simply subjected to the desert, unaware and unprepared for the forces that it unleashes and the way in which it shapes their lives.

In either case, it is a battle in which the land does not yield. As O'Brian's wife Maggie believes, 'The desert was *beyond* good and evil, something aloof and opposed altogether to human love and sympathy'.⁶⁴ In the end Martin, still trying to understand and respond to the mystical forces at play in the landscape, and Maggie, repelled by those same forces but impelled back to the bush by the strength of her husband's vision, are both swallowed physically by the desert. Explorers of a new type, they nevertheless give their lives to the land in their search for knowledge, in the same way as Leichhardt and others before them.

Whereas Watson's novels were not widely known or read in Australia at the time, the major Australian novel of D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*,⁶⁵ had an immediate and lingering impact. Lawrence spent a little over three months in Australia in 1922, but in this brief time he developed a fine sense of the relationship between Australians and the land, and in particular the apparent separation between the two.

The central figure in *Kangaroo*, visiting English writer Richard Somers, is looking for new opportunity in Australia. He shares a belief with some Lemurian heroes that in Europe 'everything was done for, played out, finished, and he must go to a new country' (8).

In order to understand Australia Somers believes he must explore the bush, but he finds the protecting veil intact, no longer shielding the physical heart of the continent, but rather its numinous, meta-physical core.

Waiting, waiting – the bush seemed to be hoarily waiting. And he could not penetrate into its secret. He couldn't get at it. Nobody could get at it. What was it waiting for? (9)

Early in the novel Somers, alone at night, undergoes an epiphany in the West Australian bush. He feels the terror wrought by the same nothingness that had harrowed and repelled those who had gone before him into the bush and the desert. Somers, however, realises that the essence of the land resides in that very nothingness.

There was a presence. He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all. He turned to go home. And then immediately the hair on his scalp stirred and went icy cold with terror. What of? He knew quite well it was nothing But the horrid thing in the bush! He schemed as to what it could be. It must be the spirit of the place . . . the roused spirit of the bush. He felt it was watching and waiting. Following with certainty, just behind his back. (9–10)

Somers has encountered the same 'absence' in the land that had been felt by previous observers. When explorers struck out into the interior in search of 'something', they in effect found 'nothing'. In addition to the sometimes brutal physical impact of the interior, it was this same nullity now encountered by Somers that made a harrowing impression on the explorers in their encounters with the interior. They travelled over regions that seemed devoid of life and the possibility of supporting human habitation. Mitchell encountered the 'dead silence of the solitary plains' (*TE*, I, 62),

and Sturt on several occasions used the phrase 'the stillness of death'⁶⁶ to express his horror at the nothingness.

Several explorers took this unfamiliar emptiness in the landscape to indicate the absence of a divine presence. Giles, for example, felt he had encountered a land 'utterly forsaken by God' (*ATT*, II, 191). As Lawrence noted, however, 'there was a presence' in the seeming emptiness, one which was paradoxically embodied in that very absence for those who were able to respond to it. Somers is lectured by the character Jaz in a passage which emphasises the notion of the presence that awaits discovery in the nothingness.

'Go into the middle of Australia and see how empty it is. You can't face emptiness long. You have to come back and do something to keep from being frightened at your own emptiness and everything else's emptiness. It may be empty. But it's wicked, and it'll kill you if it can. Something comes out of the emptiness to kill you.' (228–229)

Lawrence believed that Australians needed to come to terms with this disturbing absence if they were to comprehend the spiritual significance of their land as it was inevitably manifesting itself in their lives. Or as Australian philosopher Richard Campbell has noted in his contemplation of the inland, 'the absence of God is not nothing; it is the particular mode of his presence'.⁶⁷

In *Kangaroo* Lawrence also developed the conceit in which the emptiness of the continent mirrored an emptiness in the people; an emptiness which will only be corrected if they are able to reach an accommodation of their difficult and apparently 'centreless' land. Early in the novel Somers contemplates the Australian lifestyle and its 'absence of any inner meaning: and at the same time the great sense of vacant spaces' (24). The parallel between the emptiness of the people and the land is continued when Somers' neighbour Jack Callcott is described as, 'always aware of the big empty spaces of

his own consciousness; like his country, a vast empty 'desert' at the centre of him' (40).

Kangaroo pointed the way to the new exploration which was required of the continent. It would be an exploration not of the physical emptiness, which had now been travelled and mapped in all its vastness, but of the metaphysical void which apparently had its roots in the incapacity of Australians to integrate their physical environment into a coherent conception of the space and place in which they lived. When this search was undertaken in earnest, the explorer figure was waiting to begin his new journey of discovery.

PATRICK WHITE'S *VOSS*

Lawrence's emphasis on the emptiness of Australia and Australians had its echo in Patrick White's oft-quoted phrase, 'the Great Australian Emptiness'.⁶⁸ White used the term in the essay, 'Prodigal son', which was written in part as a defence of his novel *Voss* (1957) in which he had addressed himself to the issues arising from the physical void at the heart of the continent.

White later wrote about his period living away that, 'It was landscape which made me long to return to Australia',⁶⁹ and in particular it was the empty vistas of the bush and the Australian interior that he had known as a child and young man that brought him back.

The ideal Australia which I visualised during any exile and which drew me back, was always, I realise, a landscape without figures. The actual, noble, though often harsh and bitter Monaro scene was my spiritual sustenance . . .⁷⁰

The first two novels White published after his return to Australia, *The Tree of Man*⁷¹ and *Voss*, were intimately connected with this landscape of the bush and beyond, and his quest to under-

stand the impact they had upon those who lived there. *Voss* in particular was a vital reworking of some of the myths and imagery derived from the exploration of Australia, and a brilliant demonstration of the potential of the journey into the emptiness of the interior as the basis for an examination of the interior life of a character. White described the genesis of the novel as being 'possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading Eyre's Journal in a London bed-sitting room (and) the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions . . .'.⁷²

Before embarking on his journey White's German explorer Johann Ulrich Voss is acutely aware that the land he is about to encounter offers him the chance to reveal the noble, sublime and heroic parts of his character.

'But in this disturbing country . . . it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite. You will be burnt up most likely, you will have your flesh torn from your bones, you will be tortured probably in many horrible and primitive ways, but you will realize that genius of which you sometimes suspect you are possessed . . . (38-39)

The expedition has geographic and commercial goals, but from the start Voss's ambitions are far more personal. He realises the lack of material value of the land he will cross, but nonetheless declares himself 'fascinated by the prospect before me. Even if the future of great areas of sand is a purely metaphysical one' (67). Ernest Giles would have understood perfectly that this fictional explorer sees his journey in transcendental terms. Voss cannot settle for the 'fate of the common man', and his destiny is to be determined by the 'deserts of mysticism' and the 'transfiguration of Christ' (367).

Part of White's achievement in *Voss* was to focus attention on the inland as a reservoir of meaning about the nature of the Australian

experience, and as a landscape capable of sustaining fiction and characters which went beyond the naturalistic types that had hitherto dominated Australian writing. The extent and nature of the novel's influence in the 1950s was immense, to the point where Vincent Buckley declared we are 'now entering the *Voss* stage of our development'.⁷³

Such was the impact of White's portrayal of the Voss character that it virtually prohibited any further attempts to draw upon the explorer type in such an unambiguous manner. *Voss* became so firmly established as the archetypal imaginative exploration of the complex relationship between Australians, their land, and their spiritual identity, that any subsequent attempt to address these issues was bound to suffer its influence, while at the same time having to differentiate itself by rejecting the *modus operandi* of the earlier novel. *Voss* therefore both reinforced the appeal of the explorer as a proto-mythical figure capable of being written over in a way which adapted it to the concerns of post-colonial Australia, while at the same time ensuring that subsequent uses of the type and its related tropes would avoid such an obvious representation of an explorer. The next such direct representation of an explorer in Australian fiction did not come until Alan Attwood's *Burke's Soldier* (2003),⁷⁴ wherein Attwood retold the Burke and Wills story through the fictionalised account of one of the expedition's members, John King.

The following chapters consider the writing of novelists Thea Astley, Gerald Murnane and Rodney Hall. None of these writers has provided a fictionalised account of Australian explorers or exploration, but they have all been irresistibly attracted to representations of the explorer figure as they continue the quest to discover the meaning of the land and landscapes of Australia. Astley, Murnane and Hall are quite different types of novelists, and they have different means of drawing upon the explorer motif. All three, however, use explorer-derived tropes to reassess received notions of exploration as a means by which the interests of an expanding

commercial and political empire are served. In doing so they reinvent the 'explorer' with the intention of reaching an understanding of the metaphysical rather than the physical qualities of the land. These fictional explorer figures are in turn frustrated by the same difficult and withholding land that defeated the inland explorers.

The use made of explorer tropes by Astley, Murnane and Hall is inventive and at times even playful, but also imbued with a respect for the origins of these tropes. They are aware that by drawing upon the explorers' experience of the land they are invoking some of the most potent myths of the non-Aboriginal experience of Australia, and by recasting them for a postmodern and post-colonial audience they are continuing the process by which these myths continue to accrue resonance and complexity.

In their study of 'Australian literature and the postcolonial mind', Hodge and Mishra claimed that the archetypal explorer figure Voss is so alienated from the land, and so engrossed in his own inner journey at the expense of his physical travelling, that 'in some senses White's novel is not after all an exception to the generalisation that Australian literature has no major works based on the explorer figure'.⁷⁵ They suggest instead that Voss is an example of a type who has become common in Australian fiction; that of the,

phantasmogorical figure seeming to move through an unreal space and time, blurring present and past, city and country, truth and fiction, journey and destination; a character who cannot fail because he could not ever succeed, whose alienated creator heaps up endless metaphors of land and belonging, which only serve to reinforce his isolation. (161)

This description, however, is an apt representation of the explorer figure as he appears in recent Australian fiction. Having commenced life very much on the surface of the continent, the explorer has now gone underground, surfacing frequently in a variety of

guises, but always travelling through the 'unreal space and time' in search of an ultimate – but ultimately unreachable – destination. In the explorer's original incarnation that destination was an imperial dreamscape symbolised by the inland sea; but it is now far more likely that the destination is personal and metaphysical, an equally imagined and elusive place which, if discovered, would make sense of post-colonial Australia in a way that has hitherto proven elusive.

CHAPTER 3

THEA ASTLEY: EXPLORING THE CENTRE

I am at the centre – is it? – of my obsessional search, and there is no centre. Or if there is, it shifts position, moves away as I clutch, eludes.

Thea Astley, *Reaching Tin River* (202)

In her fiction published over four decades Thea Astley has developed and reiterated a series of interwoven themes aimed at explicating the place of the self in a post-colonial world. As her characters struggle to establish a secure identity in their still new homeland they find they must deal with the vestiges of a colonial past. These include a still alien and daunting landscape; the incorporation of remnant elements of the imperial 'home', and unresolved relationships with the indigenous people. Their search for self is often imagined by Astley as an attempt by her characters to discover their personal 'centre', and it is invariably conducted in conjunction with a metaphorically analogous search for a secure 'centre' in the land from which their personal search can proceed.

Much of Astley's fiction is located within the Queensland coastal fringe, and it can be read as an examination of the continental edge on which most Australians live and the difficulty they face in achieving a sense of either a geographic or personal 'centre' when life is conducted on such a margin. An important part of Astley's

exploration of this littoral existence is to scrutinise the great elemental forces, the ocean and the inland, which bear upon and define that edge. As Holberg, the central character of *The Acolyte* finds, his life is precariously balanced on 'this marshy waste poised elementally between sea and centre'.⁷⁷

As a means of examining the limitations and possibilities of their circumferential existence, Astley has increasingly propelled her characters away from the margin, and allowed them to explore the possibilities of life lived in spaces beyond the edge. Many of her characters move through and across different landscapes either by necessity or by choice. In doing so they engage in the archetypal journeys of those whose fate it is to dwell on margins: that is, either beyond the circumference and into an experience which is essentially foreign; or towards the centre, and therefore embracing an experience which reveals something intrinsic about the homeland. In either case, these are journeys of self-discovery which engage Astley's characters in an intensely demanding relationship with their landscapes.

It is not surprising therefore, that many of her characters are represented as explorers, engaged on their own personal quests of discovery. Even if the term is applied ironically – as it is in the case of 'the well dressed explorer', the shallow and vain George Brewster – Astley allows that even the least of her characters are involved in a personal journey or search. Their individual goals may vary, but the imperial pursuit of land, wealth and influence has typically been replaced by an altogether more personal quest. This variously involves a search for self and for community, for some barely understood spiritual need, or for a secure 'centre' in the difficult landscape.

The quest for the centre has been a constant in Astley's fiction, one that she announced in her earliest novels and to which she has continually returned. Her characters are frequently burdened by the uncertainty and restlessness common to those who lead a peripheral existence. They are outside the Europe of which their origins tell

them they are part, and they are also cut off from their own landscape and native culture, in that they are effectively excluded from inhabiting the vast bulk of the continent and divorced from the knowledge of the Aborigines who they understand have a significantly different relationship with the land. As with most post-colonial cultures there is a need to come to terms with life at the edge, an edge which in this case is exacerbated by their marginal existence and tenuous hold on their own land. As novelist Nicholas Jose has written:

The search for that elusive centre is the great Australian dream, as much today as when the early explorers perished in their quest for a life-giving source, where there was only the dead heart of the continent. Recurrent metaphors of heart, soul, and centre reflect the geographical peculiarity of a country that is most knowable at its peripheries . . . Centre-seeking is a leitmotiv in Australian culture, whether it is the impulse to align the experience of the new society with the central traditions and values of the old world, or the search for a new centre in the new land. The singleness of the island-continent makes the longing for a centre look so feasible. Yet it is an aspiration of the most difficult metaphysical kind.⁷⁸

As Jose indicates, the fascination of the centre was well known to the Australian explorers. In a continent that offered little else that was obvious in the way of achievable firsts – no great mountains to conquer, or poles to reach – the quest to reach the very heart of the landmass was the obvious challenge once the coasts were charted and Sturt and Mitchell had ceased disputing the course of the Murray-Darling river system. Irrespective of the commercial rewards it might bring, the blank at the centre of the continent needed to be erased in the interests of enabling the settler population to conceptualise their new space. As Sturt expressed it:

Let any man lay the map of Australia before him, and regard the blank upon its surface, and then let me ask him if it would not be an honourable achievement to be the first to place foot in its centre. (*NE*, II, i)

Such was the allure of the unexplored centre and the difficulty in traversing the surrounding deserts, that explorers began to use the image of a protective veil to suggest the nature of the task that awaited them. In the introduction to his journals Thomas Mitchell wrote of the 'new and vast country, over the largest portion of which a veil of mystery still hangs' (*TEI*, iii). The ambitious Eyre called upon a similar image in the following year when he announced his intentions to lead an expedition to the centre. Eyre looked north from Adelaide and announced that the city was:

the most probable point from which discoveries of importance may be made, or such as are likely to prove beneficial to this and other colonies, and from which it is possible the veil may be lifted, from the still unknown and mysterious interior of the vast continent.⁷⁹

When Eyre again recorded his thoughts as he embarked on his quest to reach the centre he once more declared his intention to 'try to lift up the veil which has hitherto shrouded its mysteries'. (*JED*, I, 23)

The image of the lifting of the veil in order to reveal the centre also appealed to Charles Sturt when the famed explorer was called upon to farewell the departing Eyre.

Over the centre of this mighty continent there hangs a veil which the most enterprising might be proud to raise. The path to it, I would venture to say, is full of difficulty and danger; and to him who first treads it much will be due. . . . I shall envy that man who

shall first plant the flag of our native country in the centre of our adopted one. (*JED*, I, 9)

Following the failure of Eyre's attempt, Sturt himself was lured back into the field. On his expedition of 1844–46 he gained first-hand experience of the seemingly impenetrable veil defending a land which yielded little in response to the speculation about its true nature. It seemed to the aging explorer that the protective veil may be more than an accident of nature:

Men of undoubted perseverance and energy in vain had tried to reach that distant and shrouded spot. A veil hung over Central Australia that could be neither pierced or [sic] raised. Girt round by deserts, it almost appeared as if Nature had intentionally closed it upon civilized man, that she might have one domain on the earth's wide field over which the savage might roam in freedom. (*NE*, II, 2)

As Eyre and Sturt were in turn defeated in their efforts to penetrate the interior, the central areas of the continent became ever more alluring, and many persevered in their belief that the continental heart might yet reveal the paradise so urgently required to complete the imperial destiny.

The veil remained in place until 1860 when John McDouall Stuart finally reached the continental centre. Although attaining the centre was a personal victory for the resolute Stuart it was not the empire affirming triumph of which he, Eyre and Sturt had dreamed. The longed-for centre was little more than a curiosity of no greater benefit to the empire than the arid regions surrounding it. There was no inland sea, and the central reaches of the continent quickly diminished in the collective consciousness of the nation. Australia, it seemed, lacked a *real* heart.

Just as nineteenth century Australians were optimistic that the material rewards promised by their new homeland would be forth-

coming when the veil around the centre of the continent was breached, so have some twentieth century Australians come to believe that they will only receive the spiritual benefits the land has to bestow when they can properly engage with the continental heartland. As theologian Tony Kelly has asked:

Dare we expose ourselves to the vastness, the silence, even the menace of the land? The land stands there, in the extent of its coasts and its interior, as a symbol of the journey that all Australians must make: 'around Australia' to have some sense of the continent of our experience; 'to the interior', to the centre, away from the noise and periphery, to the silence and dispossession of the desert. How can we come to dwell in the land in a way to nourish our souls?⁸⁰

Astley's characters are attracted to the promise of physical security that is represented by the margins of the continent, but they also seek the emotional and spiritual rewards that are embodied in the concept of the centre. Although they are attracted to the continental periphery – or even beyond – it is paradoxically the centring of themselves as a means of coming to terms with their place in an uncertain post-colonial environment which provides the psychic energy behind their journey. They long to embrace their own centre and often attempt to achieve this by immersing themselves in the centre of the land they inhabit, be it a small offshore island or the great island-continent itself. It is by undertaking a journey into the centre of their physical environment that they believe they will be able to locate that one still point of validation of the self for which they strive.

The quest for the centre is, however, as Jose noted, a quest of a 'most difficult metaphysical kind'. The centre is both elusive and dangerous, fraught with the dual threats of isolation and self-revelation, as Astley's most emphatic centre seeker Belle realises in *Reaching Tin River*.⁸¹

Philosophically, I suppose, there is little difference between the human centre I seek and the abstract. Modern self-indulgent psychology proposes that one's self is one's centre but I find the theory unsatisfying. I need a centre in which I can merge. An alter ego centre. Isn't that what we all look for? (93)

As will be examined, the fate of Belle and other of Astley's 'centre-seekers' indicates the extent of the dangers in this search. Just as the explorers of inland Australia found their quest for the rewards they hoped lay at the centre of the continent to be fraught with peril, so too Astley's heroes and heroines have to confront the spiritual dangers inherent in the discovery of their own centre. Invariably they confront the arid reaches of their own inland, with the possibilities this has for disillusionment and despair.

'WRITING CREATES MAPS'

Astley's fiction is further tied to the discourse of travel and exploration by the frequent metaphorical use of maps and mapping strategies. In its simplest form the map metaphor serves as a means by which a character's physical features can be used to chart other aspects of their lives. Frequently these images are relatively straightforward, such as 'his pale, vice-hating face a map of righteousness'⁸², and 'her face is a map of every kindness in the world'.⁸³ In such instances the face is examined as a 'map' which acts as a (supposedly true) record of the emotional state or personality of the individual described.

In many other cases, however, the figurative use of the 'map' is employed in a manner that assists in the construction of the observer as an explorer or traveller. That is, the person under observation is being 'read' as one more landmark which must be located and identified in order to enable the 'explorer' to make progress on his or her search. As Donald attempts to woo Jeannie in *The Well Dressed Explorer* he finds himself, 'turning to examine the map of her face';⁸⁴

Belle in *Reaching Tin River* meets her father for the first time and realises that 'I am treating his face like a map on which I search for recognizable features' (117); and when Dorahy in *A Kindness Cup* returns to The Taws after twenty years he:

is again amazed at the familiarity of faces like maps of countries he has once visited. The contours have subtly changed. The rivers have altered their flow. Hills are steeper. Yet they hold sufficient of their early days to make recognition possible . . .⁸⁵

Images of this type also have the effect of constructing the observed individual as newly discovered land that must be mapped before it can be properly known. In the story 'Ladies only need apply', Sadie Klein finds herself observing Leo and deciding that he was a 'male whose remoter coastline she found herself wanting to chart', and in *Drylands* Clem runs his hands around Joss's face 'as if he were charting some newly discovered continent'.⁸⁶

In *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* Astley puts the question, 'Are maps about people or places?',⁸⁷ and in her fiction the answer is that they are about both. The map represented by the physical features of her characters can be read as a guide to the individual who is being observed, the 'explorer' who is engaged in the mapping, and the places which have shaped them both.

As Simon Ryan has pointed out, it has always been in the nature of explorers' maps that they are a 'cultural construct' which act as a record of both the ground travelled and the traveller.⁸⁸ Whereas to the explorer the map represented a two-dimensional reconstruction of an observed physical space rendered according to objective cartographical conventions, they in fact embodied many of the assumptions and values of the imperial interests which gave birth to them. Ryan's *The Cartographic Eye*, is a punning title, suggesting the way in which explorers produced maps which represented the subjective experience of the exploring 'I' as much as they did the

unmediated reality of the land which was discovered by the exploring 'eye'.⁸⁹ Similarly, the facial maps that Astley's explorers read can be seen as reflections of the experience and personality of the person being observed, but those experiences and personality have in turn been mediated by the land and the landscapes they inhabit.

In a study of mapping imagery in Canadian and Australian literature, Graham Huggan suggested that by drawing upon the map topos 'post-colonial writers engage in a dialectical relationship with the colonial history of their respective countries: a relationship that necessarily places their writing within the context of (ongoing) struggle'.⁹⁰ Huggan's observation assists our understanding of Astley's use of mapping imagery, wherein the map no longer serves as a representation of the empire's battle to come to terms with the physical reality of the new land, but rather as a symbol of the individual's 'struggle' to reach an accommodation of those same spaces and landscapes.

The use of such images is not the only way in which Astley has appropriated the map topos from the discourses of cartography and exploration. With her declaration that, 'Writing creates maps. Of a sort' (*Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, 45), she has assumed for herself the role of explorer and cartographer and invites her own texts to be read as maps. As such they chart many of the experiences of the European mind in post-colonial Australia. These include, the struggle to locate a stable centre in large and sparsely populated spaces; the place and experience of women in a masculine society; the fraught relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians; and the place of the outsider in a society which values conformity. The maps that Astley writes are therefore about people, but they also serve to (re)construct explorations of place. By charting the lives of her characters in her fictional maps Astley explores the physical, and more importantly, the psychic challenges posed by dwelling on the borders of inhospitable and geographically intimidating spaces.

The search for the centre and the use of mapping imagery are but two of the ways in which Astley utilises tropes which found expression in the journals of the nineteenth century land explorers. Astley finds in the discourse of exploration a fruitful paradigm for her attempt to express and further the search for a personal spiritual foundation to life in the new world.

'A DESERT WITHIN': *THE SLOW NATIVES*

Astley's use of the coastal fringe as a setting has often focussed on its outermost margin, the beach or shoreline. For Astley the beach functions as a setting for scenes of passion and sensuousness and as the background against which many rites of passage are experienced. As novelist Robert Drewe has noted, 'Many, if not most, Australians have their first sexual experience on the coast and as a consequence see the beach in a sensual and nostalgic light', and he contrasts the coast with the 'dry, asexual, pragmatic myth of the bush and inland desert'.⁹¹

In Astley's fiction many crucial relationships are initiated and consummated in beach settings. It was a pattern established in her first novel, *Girl With a Monkey*,⁹² wherein the central relationship between Elsie and Harry commences when they meet in the water as they swim at a beach of an offshore island. Elsie is caught up in the sensuous power of the surf, surrendering herself to the 'giant and compelling swell' and the 'great surging movement', until she finally 'gave her body to the embrace of the next outgoing wave' (117) and is delivered up to the watching Harry. Other key scenes which define their relationship, as Elsie struggles to come to terms with Harry's physical demands and he tries to bridge the differences between their educational backgrounds and social positions, also occur on beaches.

In *A Descant for Gossips* Robert Moller and Helen Streibel escape the small town dangers to their affair by fleeing 'as unerringly as

migratory birds towards the salt-smelling under-moon washing sea' (170); Vesper and Hilda escape to a 'sea-anted hotel down the coast' (15) to consummate their relationship in *The Acolyte*, and Will and Connie Laffey engage in their incestuous coupling on a beach fresh from a swim in *It's Raining in Mango*.⁹³

The invariably troubled nature of these meetings is expressed in Astley's descriptions of the beach. As an edge, the beach is subject to forces emanating from both sides which render it an uncertain and changeable environment, and Astley frequently writes about it in images that expose the turbulent interface between land and sea. In particular the sea environment is a threat, forever throwing its unsettled and powerful elements against the shoreline. Images such as 'the crash of water whacking and whacking at the land'⁹⁴ and 'the sea hacked at the coast without tenderness, slammed in by a rising wind' (*It's Raining in Mango*, 138) are common. The ocean and the land are locked in an unceasing battle, in which they exhaust not only each other but also those who occupy the margin:

outside the very earth shifted emotionally, throbbed and shook
against the channel walls, the bay; and the long tides of grey
and white ate at the heart as well as the land. (*The Well Dressed Explorer*, 14)

This restless tension between land and sea in Astley's fiction is rendered with irony. For many of her quietly desperate characters the beach and the ocean appeal as more than just an opportunity to create personal and physical relationships; they are also places which promise escape and new beginnings. They frequently seek out a coastal setting when they wish to reject the harshness of the inland and the turmoil of their lives, in the hope that the beachfront will offer a more supportive environment. For most, however, it is an environment every bit as fraught as those which they are escaping. The tempestuous beaches serve as a symbol of the uncertain nature

of an edge, and an indication that landscapes will not of themselves appease the strife and lack of fulfilment in troubled lives.

*The Slow Natives*⁹⁵ incorporates one of Astley's most searching examinations of life on the coastal fringe, but it also gives an indication of things to come in her fiction with its symbolic incorporation of the expanses of sea and desert which border that edge. The novel opens in the suburbs of Brisbane, but almost immediately various characters begin to gravitate towards the beach. When the teenage Keith Leverson decides to break away from home, it is to the beach he goes, where he finds himself 'in sea-dazzle forty miles from town'. He soon falls into the company of the similarly outcast 'Chookie' Mumberson, who has come to the coast from the inland in an attempt to escape troubles of his own. It is Chookie, however, who can see the true nature of the coastal fringe, recognise its real danger and understand that it is little different from the harsh interior.

'I've never seen the beach before,' Chookie confided.

'You mean you've never seen the sea?'

'Not till this week.'

Keith was silenced, then he began to laugh.

'Sorry he said after a bit. 'Sorry. It just seems strange, that's all. I've never met anyone before who . . . I mean . . . I can't imagine. How did it strike you?'

'You ever bin inland?' Chookie demanded angrily. 'Right in, I mean?'

'Well, no.'

'Same thing,' Chookie said. 'Guess it is funny never havin' seen the sea. But I dunno why everybody thinks you gotter see it. You haven't never seen inside and I don't think that's funny. I have. Same thing, really. Just the same thing – only dry. Rollin' oceans of earth, see? Waves-a hills and no end to it. Just like this. Only brown instead of blue. And still. Terrible still except for the heat shimmer. And just as dangerous.' (120–121)

Although Chookie appears to the other characters to be almost a simpleton, he is presented by Astley as being a genuine, if failed, explorer figure. An incident is recalled in which he had recorded his own exploratory passage through the outback landscape of his childhood:

For some unknown reason, the next day Chookie had gone down to an old apple-tree in the backyard by the fowl run and had spent an hour carving his initials: AM 1897. It looked beaut. He forgot the tree was only a youngster. . . . During the year he remembered adding a few other initials and dates and things like DIG HERE, rubbing a chunk of dirt in to take away the newness . . . (170)

As an 'explorer' familiar with the inland, Chookie's advantage is that he alone knows the dry landscapes of the interior and can therefore comprehend the aridity of the seascapes that border the lives of the novel's characters. Although they may turn to the beach in search of redemption, the waters that they hope will bring them new life are as dry as deserts.

The construction of the sea as desert permeates the novel, functioning to draw attention to the similarities between the two elements in terms of both their vast physical presence and the dangers they present. The ocean is referred to as 'the cold threatening desert of water' (21), and the predatory Leo Varga described as someone who 'has clung to a raft in a never-ending desert of water' (174).

Astley's use of images drawn from the similarity between the two intimidating expanses which border the habitable edge is hardly surprising. Most Australians lead lives that are physically circumscribed by these two immense boundaries. They are regions that are travelled 'into', 'over' or 'across', but both effectively curtail the spread of the population, and are dominant factors in how Australians conceptualise the geography of their island continent. That it is an island is clear,

bordered on all sides by ocean, but at the same time too vast and unknowable to be simply an island. That it is a continent is evident from the extent of the landmass, but it is a continent that cannot be occupied and embraced across its full extent as others can.

The land-as-ocean trope is not new, but almost a cliché of Australian exploration. When Australian explorers ventured into the interior they went in search of land. That is, land as they knew it from their European experience: land that could be inhabited, cultivated and domesticated; land which they anticipated being shaped to fit their conception of ideal landscape. What they found frequently confounded these expectations, and they were often at a loss as to how the land should be described. The image that frequently came to mind was that of the other surface of similar scale, danger, sameness and lack of practical utility – the ocean.

When George Evans became the first European to cross the Blue Mountains, he wrote of a scene on the inland plains:

I am deficient in abilities to describe it properly, but shall endeavour to do so by comparing the Country to an Ocean, as it is nearly level, with the Horizon from N.W. to S.W.: small Hillocks are seen at great distances of a pale Blue, shewing as Land appears when first discovered at Sea; Spaces clear of trees may be imagined as Islands, and the Native's Smokes, rising in various points, Vessels . . . ⁹⁶

The land-as-sea image was found to be suitable for a variety of inland landscapes; so that Ernest Giles could write of both the 'waves of a timbered sea' (*ATT*, II, 247) and the 'rolling waves of sand' (*ATT*, II, 108). So common was the conceit that even the parsimonious Augustus Gregory, who resisted more successfully than any of his fellow explorers the temptation to add metaphorical embellishment to his journals, wrote that 'twenty miles of thicket could be seen, with a surface as level as the sea'.⁹⁷

It is clear that it was not only the physical similarities between the sea and aspects of inland Australia that explained the potency of the image. As Paul Carter has pointed out, the attraction of the land(scape)-as-sea image also 'lay in its symbolic fertility as a hypothesis of exploration'.⁹⁸ The archetypes of exploration familiar to land-based explorers were derived from the great European maritime journeys, and by rendering the land as ocean they were constructing their own journey in such a way that it conformed to known exemplars of voyaging, travel and discovery. It is hardly surprising therefore that enterprising explorers keen to link themselves to the great traditions of exploration would describe their own journeys in terms familiar to the reading public. Ernest Giles when describing his party setting out to cross the sandy seas of the Gibson Desert declared that:

the solitary caravan was now launched into the desert, like a ship upon the ocean, with nothing but Providence and our latitude to depend upon, to enable us to reach the other side.
(*ATT*, II, 310)

Similar imagery was invoked by Charles Sturt as he described his relief at the conclusion of one expedition in the following manner:

No mariner ever shook the reefs from his sails, on the abatement of the storm, under the fury of which his vessel had been labouring, with more grateful feelings than those with which I turn from the dreary and monotonous wastes I have been describing . . . (*NE*, II, 147)

To Giles and Sturt the desert is not only physically reminiscent of the sea, but it constitutes a sea-like space that must be traversed from shore to shore.

Whereas the explorers carried their knowledge of the sea into the

interior and used its symbolic power to suggest the scale of the land and the experience of travelling. Astley uses the similarities between the dry interior and the expanses of ocean to work a similar, but at the same time opposite effect. That is, her use of the trope carries the desert to the coast, and reminds the reader not only of the physical likeness between the two, but also the similar influence they wield over the desires of her characters. Just as the various dry 'seas' the explorers encountered mocked their dream of discovering a real inland sea, so too the hopes that Astley's characters place in their chosen seascapes are derided by the images of dryness and aridity which invade their lives. Despite the efforts of the characters in *The Slow Natives* to turn away from the inland and towards the ocean, it is the desert that, in a metaphoric sense, eventually defeats them. The seafront is their chosen place, the known and embraced border and repository of their dreams, but the inland emerges as that other more threatening space which overwhelms their lives with its implications of dryness, desolation and lifelessness, and holds them captive against the ocean.

The lives of almost all the characters in *The Slow Natives* are related using images drawn from barren and desert landscapes – images which highlight the corresponding barrenness of their spiritual lives. Bernard Leverson spends his life 'standing on his own bland desert' (45); Sister Celestine discovers that 'sanctity is more arid than she had supposed' (127); the disappointed spinsters Miss Trumper and Miss Paradise are 'dry as sticks', with 'the lipstick hooking on to the wrinkled corners of their mouths, the sad runnels, but exposing the dry lips. Or the dry souls' (86); and Father Lingard does battle with his 'prayer-dry soul' (158). Even the names used by Astley for her characters – Lake, Seabrook and Paradise – ridicule their hopes for a fertile and well-watered life; as does the street where the Leversons live, River Terrace, which is in reality 'a dried-up strip of sticky tar-paper' (7).

The images of dry and barren landscapes are, however, more

finely worked and complex than these examples indicate. Frequently they are used to suggest the failure that is common to these characters in their search for spiritual ease, by drawing upon a more elaborate metaphor of a failed water supply. For the nineteenth-century explorers of inland Australia, it was the lack of water that frequently defeated their dreams of the expanding empire and personal reward. Water was not only needed to enable explorers to continue their journey, but was also essential for any hopes for future habitation and agriculture. Any areas where dependable water supplies could not be found held little interest and even less reward for most explorers. Unfortunately, their journeys inland seemed to lead them to ever drier reaches of the continent, and the overwhelming concern recorded in their diaries was the constant need to locate drinking water.

Their problems, however, were manifold. Seasons were unreliable; evaporation rapidly reduced seemingly reliable water sources; much needed energy was expended in digging out wells, and use of water often brought with it the risk of confrontation with Aborigines who camped at the few permanent supplies. Those 'rivers' which were found frequently mocked the explorers' aspirations, as they were either dry creek beds or contained water that was too salted to drink.

Astley reworks this dependence on water as a precursor to the physical occupation of the land into a potent image of the lack of spiritual or metaphysical nourishment in the lives of her characters and their inability to inhabit truly their own landscapes. The cuckolded Bernard Leverson sees his joyless marriage as a virtual catalogue of the disappointments that dogged explorers in their search for water. It has become a barren partnership where the 'joy could trickle away like an inland river, the water holes, the sand patches, the lost artesian seas where his marriage pumped a weak current' (25). Bernard obtains some empathy from Father Lingard who confides his own spiritual unease by using a similar image.

'I'm a little tired . . . It's not boredom so much. It's hard to explain. A kind of spiritual aridity when all the springs dry up, you know, and there seems to be a pointlessness about it all.' (43)

Soon after Lingard admits to himself that he is a 'priest with his vocation askew, no other object in view but a detailless desert whose wells of prayer had dried up' (63). When he is required to counsel Sister Matthew, who is experiencing her own crisis of faith, Lingard again calls upon images derived from the failure of water.

'You do nothing,' he said. 'You endure and sit on the tip of each day . . . watching the hours tick over the west and come up in the east and eventually the drought breaks. That is what they tell me, anyway.' (132)

Sister Matthew is one of the few who is prepared to confront the dryness and aridity of her life. Rather than shrinking from the challenges of her situation she is prepared to face the aridity and explore its true meaning, waiting for such time as the drought does break. She is, as Bernard realises, an explorer of the dry regions that lie within herself.

She had not the near-fawning acquiescence of so many nuns, even her voice conveying not indifference but a self-sufficiency that made Levenson think of Scott or Sturt or Magellan – or any man at all with a desert within that must be explored. (45)

With this image of 'a desert within that must be explored', Astley addresses the dual functions that deserts serve as images of human struggle and exploration. On the one hand they express a sense of desolation and failure, and serve in the Australian context as a symbol of the sterility and 'absence' that is found in the landscape. On the other hand, deserts are also frequently endowed with associations of

revelation for those blessed with the perseverance required to endure the arid dangers that their exploration demands. In terms of their meaning to Australians, this implies they are a potential, if threatening, reservoir of insight into the true nature of life on the continent.

Explorers encountered both of these aspects of the desert. The desert areas were the visible sign of their failure to discover the inland paradise they were seeking, but for those who had the strength to endure they became an almost mystical symbol of their endurance and courage. Explorers who returned from the deserts were endowed with the mystique of the survivor, of someone who had not only made discoveries about the true nature of the country, but also of themselves. The encounter with the barren inland had brought them closer to knowing and traversing the 'desert within' themselves.

Just as the desert reaches of the continent and the failure of water serve in *The Slow Natives* as symbols of unfulfilled lives, so too Astley uses rain to express the sudden and unexpected appearance of love or compassion. For explorers the need for water was so great that the receiving or finding of it was typically seen as evidence of the munificence of the Almighty. For Astley's lost souls the relief of receiving unexpected compassion falls like an equally miraculous and desperately needed rain on their spiritual deserts. As Father Lingard hears the confession of Miss Trumper, Astley records that, 'The rain of this particular charity felt warm' (159), and when Bernard feels a fleeting connection to his son Keith, 'Love fell, just for a few seconds, a wild and unexpected rain' (99). Most telling, is the moment when Bernard and Keith finally reach a hesitant reconciliation.

(Bernard) was yet aware that in this particularly secret and tantalizing acre the drought had broken and he could see Keith clearly . . . He began to smile, a smile that overpowered him, brought him back from the lost country to definite decisions in his own well-charted landscape. (173)

Bernard, having been forced to confront the sterility of his relationships and having reached out to Keith in an attempt to rebuild theirs, is now rendered as the saved explorer who has faced and survived the 'desert within'.

'IT GIVES NOTHING BACK': *VANISHING POINTS*

The journeys of Astley's characters have not always led them towards the centre of the continent. Several of her novels are set on Pacific islands, and give her characters the opportunity to centre themselves within confined and seemingly knowable landscapes. Within the cosseted intimacy of an island setting they believe they have a chance to understand their lives in landscapes which make less demands than those imposed on explorers of larger, less contained spaces.

As the narrator of the island based *Beachmasters* explains:⁹⁹

... the world beyond the island is forgotten.

The island is the whole world.

The island is its own planet.

Seas beyond can boil with bombs, war, carnage. The island remains ... the island. (180)

Even those who do not live on islands feel the lure of these seemingly contained landscapes. Paul Vesper in *The Acolyte* constantly recalls an idyllic island whose 'twenty miles of coast have lain at the back of my mind ever since, a personal lotus land ... where for a little while I pursued my own identity' (62); and Kathleen in *Coda* believes that islands might be an antidote to the need for exploration because, 'They enclose. They are their own world'.¹⁰⁰

Just as the beach and the continental fringe failed to offer escape from the harshness of the interior in *The Slow Natives*, however, the seemingly paradisaical islands also present false promises. Having

attained their island, Astley's characters are still driven to know it completely by pursuing its (and their own) centre. The need for exploration and discovery remains strong. The island may have seemed to be an end in itself, its own centre, but it is soon revealed that the real centre is far more elusive. Not content with having attained the island, the explorer-characters are driven on in an attempt to reveal its very core. However, no sooner is this achieved than these island-centres themselves prove illusory. They are discovered to be corrupted Edens which expose Astley's characters to their own troubled centre.

In *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, Kitty Trumper sets out on foot for the volcano which lies at the island's centre. When she finally attains the crater's edge she realises the landscape contains 'a turmoil that matched in its contained surgings the inward gusts of guilt that had been her terrible sea for half a lifetime' (102). She seeks absolution from her guilt by immersing herself naked in the lagoon that borders the volcano, and manages to find some comfort in the rumblings beneath her feet. The island centre fails, however, to provide her with salvation, and she is engulfed by a cyclone that leads to her lonely death.

For the others who have travelled with Miss Trumper on holiday to the island 'paradise', the trip also becomes a wretched experience. The enforced intimacy generated by the island creates anything but the calm centre they were seeking. Their remaining pretensions are stripped away and their troubled relationships exposed, and eventually they realise they cannot escape the aridity in their lives by fleeing to an island. In an image that recalls Miss Trumper's fate at the volcano, the outcast Father Lake understands that the island has become for him the 'middle of the world', and he finds at 'the centre of it all, like the red heart of a monstrous volcanic cone, his own blazoned guilt' (212).

The most elaborate use of an island and the search for the centre is developed in 'The Genteel Poverty Bus Company', the first of the

two related novellas which comprise *Vanishing Points*. The protagonist in the story, Mac Hope, is a disillusioned academic who develops a no-frills bus company to run tours of the Cape York Peninsula. As Elizabeth Perkins has noted, these journeys into the vast and dangerous Cape which inevitably end in disaster, 'parodies the exploits of the intrepid E. B. Kennedy, whose earlier explorations paralleled Leichhardt's journey of 1844–45'.¹⁰¹

The real goal of Mac's personal explorations, however, lies elsewhere than Cape York. His journeys into the north have only made him increasingly aware of the uncertainties of dealing with the unbounded space of the Cape. He has long dreamt of an island to which he could escape and be at ease in a landscape of more contained proportions. Like a true explorer he spends his time poring over maps, not of the interior this time, but rather of the Whitsunday coastline, searching for an island where he can become:

the solitary curtained by fabric shot with blue, green and gold, a curtain so light, so dazzling, it was both filter and barrier to the world' (34).

Rather than lifting the veil surrounding the heart of a continent, Mac seeks to be 'curtained by fabric' on his island refuge. His exploration in search of an island home is undertaken not in an attempt to open up land for others in the cause of empire, but as a means by which he can disappear into the centre of a landscape of his choosing in the service of his own needs.

When Mac has eventually located an island, Little Brother, he sets out 'with the glassy fixed eye of an early explorer' (35). He is exulted by his discovery, and feels cosseted by the island landscape in a way that would be impossible on the broad expanses of the mainland. In return he 'embraced the whole island, its smallness, its roundness, its secrecies' (35). Not content, however, with having found what appears to be a centre for his being, Mac is determined

to create a centre within the centre, a place where he can further isolate and protect himself. He carves an elaborate maze through the rainforest, so that he alone can occupy the centre of the island. The maze is a concentric puzzle designed to bamboozle outsiders, but Mac is aware that it is also a 'spiritual maze he was constructing' (70), a puzzle which serves as much to conceal the troubled life of its creator as it does to hide his whereabouts.

The paradise in miniature of Little Brother is short-lived. Developers move onto an adjacent island and intrude on Mac's solitude with the noise generated by the resort's disco. As the battle between Mac and the developers escalates the maze becomes crucial to deceiving his would be pursuers, and he withdraws ever further into its puzzle, ever closer to the centre of his island, nearer to his own troubled core. Ultimately, however, Mac cannot be saved by the maze, as his real problem is his inability 'to solve the maze that was himself' (106). He is finally ejected from the island, still consumed by his love for the place, but aware that the landscape he thought sympathetic and knowable, was ultimately indifferent to his plight.

It gave nothing back. Nothing. It remained floating above the sea, tiny, perfect and unknowable, indifferent to the tearing he felt in the heart of him.

'I love you,' he said to the island. Its perfection remained unmoved. (121)

The word 'nothing', often as a single word sentence, recurs at key points in Astley's fiction, used as it is here to express the failure of the landscape to respond to the needs of those who profess to love it. Just as the explorers of inland Australia found their journeys halted by a nothingness and indifference they sensed in the land, so too do Astley's characters fail to overcome the nothingness that mocks their needs for a supportive environment as they search for a centre within themselves. It is the indifference of the land that defeats

Mac. Having rejected the mass of the continent as being an unsuitable place in which to fix his centre, and having failed in his pursuit of himself on the island, he has no further hope of refuge. He takes his boat and sets out for the east, 'straight into the day, straight for the outer reef and the ocean beyond' (122), on his final journey.

With her use of island settings Astley has pushed her characters beyond the natural edge of their continental landscape, the harsh and unknowable core of which seems to deny them the chance of locating its or their centre. Eventually, however, they find that the very smallness of the islands forces them to confront their limitations. Any solace Astley's characters draw from their island experience is short-lived. As the worldly Doss explains in *An Item From the Late News*, 'Islands might sound marvellous, lovey, but that's another myth'¹⁰².

'RACING INTO THE NOTHINGNESS': *AN ITEM FROM THE LATE NEWS*

It was in *An Item from the Late News* that Astley moved the focus of the physical quest away from the edges of the continent, and towards the interior. Other than *A Kindness Cup*, her bitter portrayal of the cruelty and malice of small town rivalries based on a tale of the murder of a group of Aborigines, *An Item from the Late News* was Astley's first literary excursion into the continental interior.

An Item from the Late News commences with an evocation of the landscape, which is to be crucial to the novel. The isolated inland town of Allbut is described in terms which locate it at the centre of its own forsaken world. In a gesture reminiscent of the 360 degree panoramic descriptions of landscape beloved by explorers, Astley commences by describing Allbut through the eyes of her narrator, Gabby:

the north lurches up in a side-swipe of scrubby range . . . West, scrub careered into salt-bush into desert. South, a lost landscape of salt-pans. (1-2)

The land is not so much inhabited as occupied in a haphazard and unsatisfactory way. It is distinguished only by 'the nothingness of the landscape', it is a 'desert saucer where the towns have been chucked about like a losing toss of dice on a vast baize of dead felt' (15). There is something unsubstantial about the town, a place where everyone is said to be 'travelling through' (73), and even the name of Allbut is little more than a dismissive shrug hinting at a mirage-like unreality. Like an island, Allbut can be the centre of its own world because it is part of no other:

There was nothing outside that town.

Is nothing.

Can nothing be walled from nothing? (1)

The 'nothing' of the landscape emphasises the sense of Allbut being disconnected, its own physical and moral world. As one character concludes, 'God [has] forgotten about me, maybe never heard of Allbut' (137). It is a landscape which still seems to await discovery. It offers no apparent source of comfort or solace, and it fails to provide a real home for those who live there. But it can provide, in the way that islands have elsewhere in Astley's writing, at least the promise of refuge. Most of the town's residents choose to live here as a retreat from the horrors and failures they have known in other places. Wafer, Moon and Colley are all 'blow-ins', seeking some form of sanctuary in 'a no-hope landscape, the bummer's Eden' (43).

Images of Eden are common in Astley's writing, but as in *An Item from the Late News*, hers is a strictly post-lapsarian world. Her various 'explorers' search out new beginnings in new landscapes, but the struggle they must endure is the coming to terms with the inevitable failure of these 'Edens' which are invariably reduced to something corrupted and undesirable. As Charlie Lunt says in *A Kindness Cup*.

'I believe in Eden. And I've tried to make one. But all the time I get the feeling the world's just a dream in God's eye.' (25)

Astley has used similar words in interview to express her belief in 'this notion of the whole world as a Garden of Eden', but that 'man has messed up the Garden'¹⁰³. This image of the 'messed up' garden surfaces frequently in her fiction. Various landscapes are described as 'this second rate Eden' (*Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, 3); 'a slovenly Eden' (*Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, 121); and a 'gim-crack Eden' (*Coda*, 131).

Wafer's refuge on the outskirts of Allbut is initially constructed as an Edenic setting, a source of new life in the otherwise dying town. Gabby's narrative refers to it as his 'discovered Eden' (165) amidst the otherwise barren landscape: 'Wafer's few acres are obscenely green. There are fruit trees, still very young, and a vegetable patch' (27). Wafer is Adam-like as he wanders naked around this small oasis, but his enjoyment of his garden will be short-lived. Moon, who will eventually destroy the house and shelter, is incensed not only by Wafer's refusal to reveal the source of a gemstone, but also by his seeming satisfaction amid the otherwise blighted landscape.

'Look at him. Some delicate minded reader who's come to a god-forsaken place like this drummed on by a dream he's got of finding his own fucking Eden. A two foot thick concrete sheltered Garden of Paradise . . . this place is his shelter, his bloody Eden . . . (92)

Such was the degree of anticipation about the exploration of the Australian interior that it had been hoped that it harboured some form of Eden, and it was not uncommon for explorers to invoke Edenic imagery when they discovered favourable land, or even to compare their role to that of Adam. Thomas Mitchell, recording his discovery of Australia Felix, declared that:

this highly interesting region lay before me with all its features new and untouched as they fell from the hand of the Creator! Of this Eden it seemed that I was the only Adam; and it was indeed a sort of paradise to me.¹⁰⁴

The story of Australian exploration, however, was the gradual realisation that the place was at best a damaged Eden, and it is also Wafer's fate that he must come to terms with his failure to secure his own Eden in the heart of the continent.

With her portrayal of Wafer, Astley deconstructs the concept of the 'explorer'. Wafer is introduced not as someone who is setting out on a journey of discovery, but rather as having already arrived at his destination. He occupies a plot by a lake just outside the town, close to a spot that affords him a panoramic view of the area. As Simon Ryan has described, the importance of the panoramic view to the explorer, both as seen and as reported in the journals, was that it enabled that which was previously unknown to be rendered as 'known', and established for the explorer a sense of dominion over the resulting view.

The gaze 'encompasses' the land, it 'commands' what is seen, and it borrows the prestige of accuracy belonging to the panorama to assert its own authority.¹⁰⁵

Wafer's panoramic gaze, however, is far less certain than the confident and acquisitive gaze of the explorer; it constantly admits elements of abstraction and doubt, and is focussed on himself as much as the landscape:

on certain days, perched two hundred feet up, he could see the hill and himself on it dog-paddling in the water below.

Which was the real hill? The real man?

The real sky or its reflection?

Or the real landscape? (3)

Wafer is clearly an explorer of a different type than those whose primary aim was to assess the geographic features and economic value of their physical environment. Indeed the novel's plot eventually turns on his self-conscious refusal to look to the 'discovered' land for profit. Whereas to most explorers the discovery of harsh and unproductive desert land was an indicator of failure, a lost opportunity for both the empire and themselves, to Wafer it offers the very negation of opportunity and identity for which he has been seeking. As a child he saw his father blown up in the London blitz, and he has lived his life since then 'looking for the perfect bomb shelter'. Eventually his search brings him to his father's home, Australia:

'This country', he explained, 'is the perfect bomb shelter. That's achieved at last. And then the shelter within the shelter.' (15)

Wafer's search for the secure centre, the 'shelter within the shelter' – is another version of Mac's maze. It is a search which draws him irresistibly towards the arid inland until he arrives in Allbut where the vast, featureless space provides him with the desired sense of escape. His quest is an inversion of the notion of exploration being the fulfilment of the imperial destiny in which the explorer reveals the previously 'undiscovered' sites into which the empire can expand its civilization. Wafer is an explorer who has set out not in the hope of discovering 'something', but in search of the very 'nothingness' that characterises Allbut's landscape. He has rejected civilization and seems intent on effacing his own existence. The attraction of Allbut for Wafer is its very lack of significance.

As he searched, he odd-jobbed, relaxed with the ironically flat ramparts of the land about him . . . until somewhere in the top of the country the nothingness of the landscape became delight as he found a particular scrambling of the dice, a lake, some sky-nudging knobs of hill as if they had been waiting all those years just for him. (15)

Rather than being revealed as a site pre-destined for imperial expansion, Allbut has simply 'been waiting all these years just for him'. Gabby is intrigued that while 'every other karma bum was mumbling mantras through lush coast nirvanas', Wafer is 'a brutal self-purger who wanted a landscape skinned to the bone' (3).

In the featureless landscape of Allbut Wafer encounters a place which fulfils an entirely personal need, and he embraces it as an opportunity to erase the fear which has driven his search. Beneath his house on the outskirts of the town, he builds his bomb shelter. He gives Gabby a tour of his shelter, and she finds it adorned with signs, poor puns that reflect his spiralling retreat into the centre of the land.

'Look up', Wafer tells me, grinning now.

Above me, writ huge, 'sealing'.

And to my stunned right 'whorl'. (29)

Wafer's withdrawal is not, however, only into any safety the remote town and its desolate landscape might offer. But as Gabby realises the shelter is an 'underground womb', and Wafer has retreated into his own troubled centre, his own desert.

'You've missed one,' I say to the precious bastard. 'Flaw'. (29)

Wafer is not the only character who has been lured into the barren inland by a need to escape. Moon and Colley have also gravitated to Allbut as a result of a desire to use the blankness of the landscape as a means of distancing themselves from their pasts. They too are explorers intent on escaping a past rather than constructing a future.

The truth about Moon is vague, but Gabby pieces together a story that involves American origins, service in Vietnam, drugs, and murder on two continents. He is given to violence, but he suffers from the guilt born of his actions. He finds himself restlessly moving

in search of a place where he 'could damp down the guilt that always followed anger' (37). His troubled wanderings bring him to Sydney, and then the inland, and finally to Allbut in a desperate attempt to outrun his violent past.

Colley is also running from problems created by his own flawed character. Indolence and dishonesty cost him jobs as an architect in Melbourne and Sydney, and he is eventually forced to Malaysia in search of work, where his ineptitude results in a man's death. He returns to Australia, where he drags his wife and daughter, Emmie, around the countryside as he undertakes a series of increasingly demeaning jobs and tries to forget his past. Eventually, his wife, desperate for a home, demands they settle in one place. That place, on the 'rim of desolation', (48) is Allbut.

The narrator Gabby, is another of the novel's explorer characters, and she is far more self-conscious about her role as a 'seeker' than is Wafer, Moon or Colley. She alone expresses an understanding of her need to find some positive centre to her being, rather than simply remove herself from unwanted memories.

Although Gabby is born in the area, she is there now in retreat from an unsuccessful attempt to escape. Leading for some time the life of the artist *manque* she has focussed her exploratory energy on her art as a means of escaping the tedium of Allbut, and of discovering her personal centre. She realises, however, that her painting, rather than being a means of release, has only served to continue her enslavement to the town. The landscapes of Allbut have infused her art with the very qualities which fuel her desire to escape:

for five years I have been painting the very heart of boredom and no one has recognized it: the ennui of landscapes yawning stale-breathed before the inevitability of seasons . . . My leaves droop with green tedium, city skylines collapse in exhaustion and even my abstractions of those things secrete what I can only call an interesting fatigue. (7)

Gabby has become a captive to the spirit of the landscapes of Allbut. Her attempts to escape – represented by a failed marriage and unsatisfactory travel to Europe and America – are doomed. No sooner does she declare ‘I am my own epicentre’, than she acknowledges that ‘I am about to crumble’ (7). Her ‘self-centred’ revelation has led to a breakdown and her subsequent retreat to Allbut.

With so many of the characters engaged in acts of escape, the novel paradoxically develops an air of exploration and discovery. In attempting to retreat from the world into a wilderness, they become a parody of the Australian experience of exploration. The explorers had gone to the interior in search of a not very clearly understood ‘something’ which they hoped would bring them and the expanding empire great wealth, and instead found for the most part ‘nothing’, a negation of their hopes and desires. In *An Item From the Late News* the explorer-characters have been attracted by the nothingness of the landscape, only to find their hopes denied when the waste promises to reveal something – great wealth in the form of minerals.

Astley also subverts accepted notions of exploration in her account of the geography of Allbut. One of the consequences of Australia’s unique position as an island continent, is that its exploration was undertaken in the knowledge that there was a single geo-political identity which was being ‘discovered’. By the time major inland exploration commenced, the coastline had been circumnavigated and charted, and British colonies established at intervals around the coast. The reality of Australia as a separate geo-political entity had been established, and there were clearly no national boundaries to cross in order to complete the exploration of the interior. The only demarcation of the land was between Aboriginal groups, and although explorers were aware of tribal territory, neither they nor colonial governments acknowledged the Aboriginal ownership of these territories.

While a primary purpose of exploration was to further the process of acquisition of the emerging nation by mapping, describing, naming, and claiming formal ownership of the land as it was 'discovered', *An Item From the Late News* records an opposite process. In the novel Australia's identity as a separate geo-political entity is being undermined by the incursion of the strategic and economic interests of other nations. Like a true explorer Colley makes maps, but rather than being maps which help establish the identity of Australia, they record the land around him which is not 'Australian'.

'I've made a map of this country and marked on it all the places from which Australians are barred by foreign military authorities. North West Cape. Pine Gap. Honeysuckle Creek.' (42)

In a reflection of the process by which some explorers and settlers intimidated the native population off their land, Colley describes how he has been attacked by the new wave of occupants, and of how 'In my own country, I am nearly run off the road by low-flying operatives from the States . . . (42).

Another view of this process is provided by Gabby's father when he argues that the appropriation of the land by foreign powers continues, only it is no longer exclusively in the service of British interests. Australia, having been 'taken' through acts of exploration and occupation, now continues the process of alienation by giving itself up to the highest bidder.

. . . well, all Australia has done for two centuries – you know that old joke about rape? – is lie back and think of England . . . Now she thinks of the States, Japan and France as well. Even West Germany . . . This country's like a dame with hot pants – give give give to any takers. (39)

Wafer, Moon and Colley all assist this process of the alienation of Australia by bringing with them to Allbut the overseas experiences that they wish to escape. Wafer's shelter brings the holocaust to Allbut as surely as the explorers took their British interests and values into the interior a century earlier. And even Wafer's small retreat is somehow not part of 'Australia', but rather his own piece of territory in a foreign country.

'An embassy. This is an embassy. This. All this. It's my bit of territory in an alien stink-hole' – he was surprised to hear himself call Eden that! – 'and I have diplomatic immunity.' (140)

Allbut is not only part of a nation that is in the process of surrendering a sovereignty gained through exploration and settlement, but a place in which the process of settlement itself seems to be unravelling. As Wafer journeys towards Allbut he passes not through a new land of possibility and promise, but rather through a landscape that carries the signs of already failed occupation.

Crossing the landscape he had driven through a score of abandoned mining towns, grieving places of fallen roofs, the stump foundations of shanties whose tin walls lay drowned in nettles, skeleton sheds picked clean by scroungers, boarded-up pit-heads and rusting pieces of tramline, boiler and stamper. At the end of grass-shrouded tracks the flame of poinsettia still burning where someone seventy years gone had made a garden . . . How could all that hugger-mugger living be nothing now? (166)

Wafer's 'exploration' has not led him to the discovery of a place where occupation and commerce can be created but rather a place where they have already been tried and failed. Allbut is a shrunken town, reduced from two thousand inhabitants to fifty; and we are reminded that this is a place which 'provides terrible tensions be-

tween landscape and flesh . . . And in the end landscape wins' (97).

An Item from the Late News reaches its climax as the various 'explorers' are brought together to trek into the desert surrounding Allbut, with the purpose of finding the diamond bearing ore which the townsfolk believe Wafer has discovered. Led by the brutal Sergeant Cropper they set out amid a scene that parodies the departure of nineteenth century exploring expeditions. The men of the town are called together, and Cropper calls for a 'good luck toast to our little exploring party' (163). The reluctant Wafer, reduced to the role previously played by the Aboriginal guides, is 'harried with questions about distances, directions that he fielded as if he meant to get the whole mad business over with' (163). Although captive to the other men, Wafer finds himself the reluctant 'leader' of the party by virtue of his supposed knowledge. He has become:

a bonded leader of men wryly hoeing away into the desert with the disciples packed close and the promised land as much a mystery to him as to the rest of us. (169)

Wafer, however, is incapable of leading or guiding the expedition. He has no concept of discovery, and he 'didn't care whether they found something or nothing' (169). To him, this crazed search for instant wealth is a matter of no importance, and the signs on the land that he is called upon to interpret, are non-existent.

Whereas the true explorer completed the journey and then represented its 'reality' according to the accepted principles of mapmaking, Wafer has earlier announced that 'I don't chart my travels' (83). He is incapable of plotting a course which would relocate the place where the gemstone was found. His attempt to retrace his steps constructs an entirely new journey, the course of which maps nothing more than his own confusion and deception.

Left or right? Wafer thought quickly. He could make any choice at all.

'Right,' he said. 'Right'. He smiled at the thought of this innocent new map he was charting, pegging out with randomly disposed lies . . . (169)

Whereas the task of mapping falls to the empire builders who wish to possess the land and derive some material benefit from it, Wafer is an 'explorer' without such expectations. To him the journey, the path it took, and the nature of the land it covered, are of little interest. The land remains the *tabula rasa* it seemed to be the first time he crossed it, when he found the 'landscape was measureless, had no horizons' (165).

Wafer leads the party aimlessly, deciding the directions in which they travel on a whim, and taking them into a landscape that becomes increasingly alienating. There can be no reaching of a far coast, or solution to the riddle of the rivers, or discovery of an inland sea, or indeed, finding of the motherlode. As the futility of the quest and the extent of Wafer's deception become apparent, he is still unable to properly conceive of the importance of the singular goal that drives the other men.

'It's as if I've blocked it totally out. But all you wanted was a place. A place. That was the thing, wasn't it? The idea of discovery.'

'Not quite,' Stobo said gently. (192)

In the absence of discovery the expedition rapidly becomes a misbegotten journey into the heart of darkness at the centre of the forbidding continent. For whereas the physical features of the landscape have failed to make an impression on Wafer, its emotional tenor gradually begins to impose itself as the party move into ever more remote areas. The 'nothingness' in the landscape that had seemed to offer Wafer the chance to escape his holocaust fears,

now assumes a chilling presence which heralds the coming tragedy. They encounter 'a landscape that held all the dissonant chords of human grief' (170), and find themselves amongst 'the unending mournfulness of trees' (174). This mounting horror of the landscape was of course familiar to the nineteenth-century explorers. They too were led on by Edenic dreams which were invariably shattered by the reality of the land they encountered; a reality expressed in Peter Egerton Warburton's despairing phrase, 'We have hoped for the best, but met with the worst'.¹⁰⁶

As Wafer 'leads' the expedition into the desert he has already come to terms with the failure of his own Eden. His 'shelter within the shelter' has turned out to be nothing of the sort. He has been brutalised and intimidated by the men of Allbut; he is under threat of criminal charges; and he has been forced to return to the town after trying to flee. On his return he finds his garden has been invaded and his shelter burnt to the ground.

The expedition into the desert does, however, take Wafer on his own journey of discovery. Whereas the others hunt for their Eldorado, Wafer becomes involved in his own search for an 'eldorado of the mind' (165). Prior to commencing his forced desert journey, Wafer has had a dream recalling the dissolution of his relationship with the thirteen year old Emmie Colley, the only person in Allbut who seems to understand his view of the world. For Wafer, Emmie assumes a 'runic quality' (179). He has, however, been threatened with arrest when it is rumoured that his relationship with the underage Emmie is sexual – although the townsfolk are more concerned that the threat be used as a means of getting Wafer to guide their search rather than as a way of righting any wrong done to the girl. Intimidated, Wafer severs his relationship with Emmie and makes his failed attempt to flee.

Wafer's dream occurs after he has left Allbut and immediately before his 'recapture' by Cropper. He dreams that he is trapped within 'a giant translucent stone' watching Emmie and her father

'dancing slowly and gravely' (152), and the dream ends with:

Emmie and her father dancing away, measured, deliberate, into a curtain of dusty grey scrub that opened and closed like stage draperies. (153)

As Cropper forces Wafer to return to Allbut, he catches another 'sudden flicker' of the dream:

glimpsed through partings in the dusty scrub as Emmie danced gravely alone, her almost adult face turning once to look at him. Once. The curtains of scrub closed. (156)

Emmie is enveloped by the landscape, and Astley expresses the disappearance using the image of the veil or curtain so beloved by nineteenth century explorers for expressing the impenetrability of the continental centre. At that moment she is lost from Wafer, and lost to the landscape.

Emmie remains, however, Wafer's ultimate desire, as tangible to him as the promise of the gems is to the other men. These two dreams, Emmie and the gemstones, are closely linked. Emmie has previously been compared to the stone in a scene in which the young Timothy Rider comes across Gabby painting a portrait of the girl.

Timothy (was) watching the portrait with its hazy blues, a stilled light within its centre.

'It reminds me,' Timothy says judiciously . . . 'of Wafer's stone.'

. . . I'm flabbergasted that unconsciously I've derived simile from the secretive lump of gem Wafer has in his house

. . . I give Wafer a wisp of a smile and all he says is, 'It's a pretty thing.'

'The gemstone?' Smiler asks coming in from the summer.

'Both.'

'Both?'

Timothy Rider steers Emmeline's daddy towards my canvas.

'See. The painting. The stone.' (55–56)

As the exploratory party make their way deeper into the desert, each member carries with them their own dream. Whereas the bulk of the party are 'pricked by dreams that meant escape into power, the heaven of money' (162), the landscape induces Wafer to recall his own very different dream. He finds that the one point in the landscape which he can recognise is the place at which Emmie disappeared.

About him the landscape became the landscape of his dream,
riding back to him now so distinctly his guts contracted with
recognition. (170–171)

The map he is creating through his aberrant exploration has nothing to do with the topography of the landscape or the search for minerals; it has become a way of tracking his dream of the departed Emmie. Shocked by his 'recognition' of the landscape, Wafer calls the party to a halt, announcing that this is the place where he found the gemstone.

'It was here', Wafer said, surprised by the authority in his voice.

There was certainly something here, if only the negatives of a
dream that might or might not be the truth of the matter . . . (171)

Just as explorers were teased by mirages and dreams of the inland sea and great wealth which always seemed to be just out of sight, Wafer is drawn into his deception by 'the girl dancing her saraband into diminishing landscapes' (168). The two dreams which lead the men on, the girl and the gemstone, are again united when Wafer realises that:

His dream could have been as singular as a floater, as the lump of sapphire he had picked up somewhere else.

He was beginning to believe himself, his lies, the place . . .

Through the grey scrub across the creek he could see the solemn disturbance of Emmie's dance.(171)

Explorers of inland Australia typically confronted, as Wafer does here, that point where they recognize the ineffable nature of a land which tantalizes with its refusal to reveal that which is most ardently desired. The landscape into which Wafer leads the party taunts him with its reminder of his loss of Emmie, and it also teases the other men in their hunt for the gems. Stobo finds a stone with 'a slightly greasy look but there was that elusive glitter under the skin of it' (182). They argue. Is it rock crystal? Sapphire? Perhaps the ultimate prize, diamond? Or, as Wafer mockingly suggests, zircon? They are momentarily enthused by the discovery, but by the day's end disillusionment has set in. Cropper announces that, 'There's nothing here. Nothing except mud and gravel' (189).

This 'nothing' which is inherent in the landscape is the final element needed to construct the climactic tragedy. The fossickers are driven to anger by the refusal of the land to surrender its riches, and Wafer's disillusionment and self-destructive urge are goaded by the impassive landscape that has seemingly swallowed his own object of desire. The spark which ignites the final calamity is provided by the equally disillusioned Gabby. She has joined the desert journey as a final chance of realising her own dream, her love for Wafer. As they press on into the desert, however, Gabby is forced to realise the strength of Wafer's attachment to Emmie, to accept that she will never win his affection, and to confront the depth of her own discontent. Wafer tells her that 'Life is one long search' (177), but Gabby is despairing, declaring that 'All those years I had been searching [have] humbled me' (185).

The word 'nothing' returns to haunt the final pages. Not only

have the fossickers encountered 'Nothing except mud and gravel'; but Gabby's pleas for recognition from Wafer result in 'Nothing' (185). As they make their way back to Allbut, Moon is:

chanting with metallic irony, 'No me queda nada nada.'

I can translate that. Don't have a thing. Nothing at all. Nothing. Nothing. Does he mean himself? Wafer? The lot of us? (195)

The evidence suggests that it applies to all of them. Each of the central 'explorers' is shut out of the landscape and their dreams, and in the case of Wafer and Gabby, shut out of the lives of those who matter to them.

Gabby's isolation is made complete by a fight with Wafer in which he finally rejects her. Humiliated, Gabby reveals the extent of his deception to the other men. Cropper's revenge is swift and brutal. As they return to Allbut he stops the truck within sight of the lake which had been a sign of hope for Wafer, but it now returns a 'bland eye' (196), becoming one more indifferent element in the landscape and a derisive reminder of the barren inland sea.

Cropper announces that he will charge Wafer with the offences against Emmie. Wafer's reaction is to make a final effort to extract something from the landscape. With the mirage of Emmie disappearing into the inland drawing him on, he rushes toward it, 'racing into the nothingness he knew was ahead' (197). It is a futile gesture of escape, and Wafer is shot in the back and killed by Cropper in this final failed attempt to extract some shelter from the elusive 'nothingness'. Gabby looks on as he is brought down, and recalls that 'his feet kept pounding down the road, down the gulf I knew he was exploring' (198).

As a discourse on exploration *An Item From the Late News* examines the situation of the outsider or the misfit, who looks to the *tabula rasa* of the Australian interior as an opportunity to (re)discover a place in the world. These characters are not coming

to further the cause of empire or personal glory, but to atone for their shortcomings and provide for their own needs. They are, however, faced with the same problems as the earliest explorers of the interior: a landscape which deflects those needs and refuses their dreams. Wafer, Moon, Colley and Gabby are enticed by a blank on the map which promises redemption, but which ultimately withholds the very fulfilment which had seemed so attainable. As surely as Eyre and Sturt failed to lift the veil surrounding the centre of the continent; Wafer, Moon, Colley and Gabby fail to penetrate their own shrouded centre.

‘THERE IS NO CENTRE’: *REACHING TIN RIVER*

An Item From the Late News marked a new stage in Astley's developing interest in the notion of centrism and the continental interior, and it is an interest she has pursued in later novels. *It's Raining in Mango*, *Reaching Tin River*, *Vanishing Points*, *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow*, and *Drylands* all trace the ebb-and-flow of lives which are spent negotiating the space between the fringes and the interior of the continent.

There is a strong sense of restless movement in these novels, of dissatisfaction with a particular place and a searching for new landscapes that can somehow satisfy the longing or need felt by many of the characters. This creates an environment in which exploratory tropes continue to be utilised as a means of rendering the personal quest of characters in such a way that they also examine the post-colonial need to find a place for the self in the new world.

Astley's increased use of the image of the circle and the centre to suggest the inward journey of her characters is prefigured in several passages in *It's Raining in Mango* in which Will Laffey imagines his quest to find his place in the world in terms of locating his centre:

*What am I? Will wonders. No tough centre like Con's, like father's.
Take father as the centre of my circle and swing a curve that has
the perfection of its arc broken only by the beach north of Swiper's.
The radius is one hundred miles . . . (228)*

It is Will's nephew Reeve, who ultimately sets out to discover the pattern of his family's past in this country. He is disillusioned with his own circumstances, but believes at least that his family is part of this landscape; 'My source is here, in the north, inextricably' (238). At the novel's end he sets out on a journey of exploration to Cape York in search of the landscapes of his forebears; a New Age explorer interested not only in the geography of the Cape, but in the particular landscapes created and occupied by his ancestors.

'I'm going to walk,' Reeve said after a while.

'Walk? Walk where?'

'Right up the coast. Right up to Charco and in to the Palmer.'

'You're nuts,' Malloy says. 'Mind if I watch'.

'It all started there,' Reeve says. 'I'd like to take Billy Mumbler along.'

Malloy laughs. 'Doing an early explorer, eh? A Kennedy complete with Jacky-Jacky. You've got a hope.' (239)

Reeve is an explorer, but he is not 'doing an early explorer', in that the goal of his exploration is far more equivocal. His primary aim is not to locate new lands to enable the expansion of the empire, but rather to rediscover the landscapes of his forebears as a means to help fix his own identity. Whereas self-discovery might have been a by-product of many long and arduous journeys of inland exploration, in this case it has become the purpose of the journey. Whereas nineteenth century explorers saw their travels as securing a future for the empire, Reeve's journey is undertaken in search of a very personal past.

'What will you do when you get there?' she asks.

'I'll leave my footprints, that first,' Reeve says. 'And I'll stand and see and be satisfied.'

'That won't be enough,' Connie says. 'You'll want to stay and start the whole cycle over again.'

'Maybe,' Reeve says. 'I don't think so. Who knows?' (239)

It was not in the nature of the expanders of empire to 'stand and see and be satisfied'. They were acutely aware that their success would be measured not only by the accomplishment itself, but in the aftermath of settlement and profit.

Reeve's journey into past landscapes as a means of self-discovery is a precursor to a similar but more elaborately detailed journey in Astley's following novel, *Reaching Tin River*. Her use of imagery derived from mapping and the search for the centre is found at its most intense in this later novel.

The principal character in *Reaching Tin River*, Belle, is possessed with a passion for (re)locating the centre of her existence. She has become estranged from her family and the inland landscapes of her childhood, but she has a belief that together they are the key to unlocking her 'wavering, unsure centre' (6). Belle variously expresses her predicament as: 'I am turning into my own centre' (59); 'I have no centre' (73), and 'I am the stranger in need of a centre' (73). She marries in the hope that 'I might at this point find my missing centre' (80), and realises that in rebuilding her relationship with her mother, 'I am trying to make her my centre' (85). She calls herself the 'centre hunter' (111).

The focus of Belle's increasingly obsessive search becomes a man long dead, Gaden Lockyer, whom she knows only through archival photographs and aged newspaper clippings. Lockyer has been a champion of the empire, a pioneer who carried the values of possession and profit into the new land. To the introspective and rootless Belle, the magnetic Lockyer represents 'a centre in which I

can merge' (93). She painstakingly unravels his life as bank clerk, pastoralist, politician, husband and father, and traces his lifelong movement around the inland Queensland towns that had been the landscape of her own childhood.

Belle eventually believes that in order to attain her centre she must travel in search of the places that were occupied by Lockyer. By undertaking this journey she recreates the archetypal explorer's journey towards the centre of the continent, and in the process she makes her own maps. But whereas for the explorer a map is constructed as the journey unravels and serves to record the path of the previously unknown route, Belle intends to use her map as a guide in her search for her own 'alter ego centre':

I have drawn a map.

I have plotted a course.

I intend plugging into that map, under landscape, under time, . . . until I surface, gasping, clutching my long-dead beau by the arm. (132)

Her interest is not in the map as a two dimensional guide to topographic features, but rather as a point of departure for her own metaphysical journey. Belle's travels are, she notes, a journey through 'my mental and actual map'. (135)

On her journey Belle encounters the same alien landscapes which denied explorers access to the centre and thereby confounded the hopes of the empire. In words reminiscent of those found in explorers' journals, her diary records her appalled reaction to the inland spaces: 'The stillness of the scrub, the lack of insect hum, are menacing'. She concludes that the 'country is full of them, spirit circles that reject intruders' (146). For Belle her rejection by the land is a refusal of her culture and the 'civilization' she represents, and moreover it symbolises her inability to fulfil the goal of her search for her own centre: 'It is as if the countryside rejects

. . . my colour, my language, my personal search. It threatens' (146).

Belle, however, perseveres. Her journey takes her further inland, and then, in mimicry of the explorer's journey into the centre followed by the retreat to the coast, she begins to track Gaden Lockyer towards his final resting point, the coastal town of Tin River. Along the way her journey is increasingly represented as an exploratory journey. Belle declares that 'I am my own stout Cortez', (160) and in her diary she contrasts the exploration undertaken in the cause of empire with her own intensely personal quest:

I am a genuine quester probing the unknowns of a district's past. There was nothing strange about Fawcett or Amundsen or Stanley except their obsessions and a delighted public (cheers! cheers!) regarded their obsession as commendable. Expansion of territory. Profits and spoils of colonialism. Scientific interest. All the shabby reasons with which political leaders manage to cloak their greed in glory. Make it personal and it becomes a bad joke, a laugh. What is lesser about my own exploration? (181–182)

Belle's personal exploration, however, proves no more fruitful than did most nineteenth-century attempts to expand the empire into the continental interior. Gaden Lockyer remains stubbornly unreachable, and Belle's attempts to 'enter' his life are futile. As part of her plan to join her life with his, she has carried on her journey a life-size poster of the Lockyer family. At a farmhouse he once occupied, she uses the poster as a prop for her most extreme attempt to merge with the figure of her obsession. The poster is attached across the doorway of the now abandoned house:

I concentrate on them, . . . backforcing my thoughts towards that centre until everything outside me is diminished . . .

I lengthen my stride to trot, to sprint, running faster than time until I am hurtling forward up the veranda steps and

hurling myself bodily through my paper hosts, making sure it is Mrs Lockyer I obliterate, and I am gaspingly through beyond their startled faces to the other side of an empty room whose walls and floors bear the injuries of absence.

Nothing.

Nothing but a wood sliver in my foot and an overwhelming emptiness . . .

The hollowness mocks me. (176–177)

Just as the eventual revelation of the centre of the continent proved to be far from what had been hoped, Belle is similarly disappointed by her planned moment of revelation. She too stands bereft in the indifferent landscape, and as had so many explorers of inland Australia, finds her efforts and dreams mocked by its emptiness. The ‘nothing’ which confronts her is the same disinterested space which defeated the hopes of Wafer, Moon, Colley and Gabby; and the nineteenth-century explorers and empire builders.

Belle eventually reaches Tin River, but by then she realises that the search for her centre is futile. Rather than being a source of revelation the inland landscape has only served to confuse the task, and her goal has been no more substantial than the mirages that taunted inland explorers:

I am at the centre – is it? – of my obsessional search, and there is no centre. Or if there is, it shifts position, moves away as I clutch, eludes. (202)

Belle finally acknowledges that ‘There is no centre to this circle’ (208). For her, as for the explorers, the centre has proven to be an empty and debilitating ‘nothingness’ that she does not have the capacity to explore or occupy.

In trying to define what is unique about the Australian sensibility and the way it is manifested in the nation's literature, Dorothy Hewett wrote that:

I think that if I was forced to define it I would have to say that Australia is for me an emptiness . . . both physical and emotional . . . in other words a space. It is hard to identify with a space, it is hard to write about a space.¹⁰⁷

Thea Astley's fiction in general, and her use of various tropes derived from the landscape of the country and its exploration, can be seen as part of an attempt to deal with the unique space, and in particular the 'emptiness' of Australia.

The metaphysical problem presented by the Australian space is the need to occupy and signify such vast and sparsely populated areas in a way that can sustain a people who for the most part derive from cultures which value intimacy and 'connectedness' in their construction of landscape. At some point most of Astley's major characters address themselves to this issue as they come face-to-face with the need to fashion a response to the potentially enervating demands of unfilled and unfulfilling space, of which they find evidence in both their landscape and their own lives. It is that point at which Julie Truscott in *Vanishing Points* declares:

Enough. This was terror Australis, the fear of those unending spaces, the wild unenclosures. I found myself shuddering. (210)

For Julie her fear is engendered by 'unending spaces', but that fear in turn constitutes a dangerous displacement of other emotions within herself. For those who are sensitive to it, the nothingness of the landscape creates another, and entirely more personal unfilled space within themselves.

In addressing herself to this issue Astley has described various

responses: clinging tight to the margin and attempting to ignore the pressures that bear upon it from both sides; searching for more hospitable and contained spaces in island locations; and, finally, moving toward the centre in an attempt to reconcile individual needs with the demands made by the vast, nonpareil heart of the land. This final response attempts to draw aside the veil that prevents disclosure of the metaphysical heart of the continent. Although Astley uses exploratory tropes in much of her fiction, it is in this attempt to rend the psychic veil surrounding the continental core that the analogies between the individual's search for a personal centre and the explorers' quest for the physical heart of the continent are most apposite.

As the explorers of the inland discovered, the veil protecting the continental centre proved difficult to penetrate, and even when the goal had been achieved, the rewards that had been anticipated were not forthcoming. The veil, it seemed, remained intact. Astley's writing leads to the conclusion that the centre of the self, at least in a post-colonial setting struggling to attain a satisfactory foothold within its own landscapes, is equally resistant to exposure. The goal remains apparently 'walled by nothing', but that is the nature of a veil.

CHAPTER 4

GERALD MURNANE: EXPLORING THE REAL COUNTRY

They rode on, not needing people to watch who could not even tell which of the two places, the one that the pioneers were riding towards and the one that the watchers could turn around and go home to, was the real country and which was only a place that people watched others riding towards.

Gerald Murnane, *Tamarisk Row* (31)

It is frequently noted about Gerald Murnane that he is a notorious non-traveller, somebody who feels instantly uncomfortable outside of his familiar landscapes of the Melbourne suburbs. Coupled with Murnane's distaste for travel is an almost pathological insecurity when he is unsure of his surroundings. He has stated that,

I can't relax or feel at home even in a strange suburb of Melbourne. I want to sit down with the street directory, and think where I am in relation to my axes and angles.¹⁰⁸

In his story 'First love' Murnane has played with this aspect of his personality and how it has become enmeshed with his own self-image and the way in which that image is transmitted.

Somewhere today in a suburb of Melbourne is a man who calls himself a writer of fiction but who writes, in fact, a sort of diary of the man he wishes he could be . . . Before an interview he will always ask to be asked about his habits and preferences. And he especially likes to be asked if he has done much travelling lately.

When that question is put to him the man says he hardly ever travels, and certainly never to places that other people choose as their destinations. He says he has never been in an aeroplane and he has only once crossed the River Murray in a northerly direction. And while his interviewer pauses to wonder about all this, the man adds that he does all the travelling he needs to do in his mind – in his dreams.¹⁰⁹

It is these dreams of travel which find expression in Murnane's writing. For although the author himself is a non-traveller, his fiction is dominated by the idea of travelling and journeying. True to Murnane's character there is little physical travel in his fiction, but travelling recurs constantly in more abstract forms, and it is invariably coupled with notions of discovery and exploration. Even a cursory reading of Murnane's fiction reveals that journeying to, observing, and occupying various landscapes (both real and imagined), are dominant themes. For while Murnane is not a traveller in the traditional sense, he is an explorer of a different kind.

The precise relationship between Murnane and the landscapes he writes about is not easily pinpointed or described. He is interested in some aspects of physical or 'real' landscapes to the point of compulsion, but landscapes in Murnane's writing also demand to be read symbolically. His real subject is himself: his own mind and its labyrinthine patterns of imagining, dreaming, creating, knowing and remembering, and the way these can be used to make sense of himself and his world. Murnane's fiction is an attempt to create a representation of his own psychic topography, and 'landscape' is the overwhelmingly dominant image he uses to represent this inner self.

And as much as Murnane uses images derived from landscape to transmit a sense of his inner self, they go hand-in-hand with tropes derived from exploration and mapping which are constantly used as metaphors for the discovery of the contours of his imaginative life.

While Murnane's 'explorations' are intensely personal, the images he uses to express them connect fluently with the experiences of landscape which help unify the imagination of Australians. Just as the harsh landscape is traditionally used to symbolise the difficulty Australians have in coming to terms with their land, so too is the inaccessibility of certain landscapes used by Murnane to suggest his sense of personal isolation; and as the inner regions of Australia are frequently taken to represent something essential about the Australian experience, Murnane uses them to signify some revelatory experience in his own life. And while exploration in Australia was a frustrating and unrewarding task through which Australians eventually learnt about the uncompromising nature of their land, it serves Murnane as an image of his failure to discover those landscapes which might enable him to make full sense of himself.

It is open to speculation as to whether Murnane is using images derived from exploration and mapping consciously because of an understanding of how they will resonate with Australian readers, or indeed because they are simply the only way he has of 'seeing' his imaginative life. The effect of their use, however, is tantalising. On one hand the intense engagement with the personal and abstract in Murnane's fiction suggests that his geographic settings are arbitrary, but on the other hand his preoccupations with the symbolic nuances of the Australian landscape, history and psyche suggest that in exploring the mystery of himself he is aware that he is also exploring a mystery common to other Australians.

The word 'mystery' is appropriate; it occurs frequently in Murnane's fiction and invokes the correct impression of a goal that, if achieved, would be no less than the essence of life itself. Murnane has described the compulsion at the core of his writing as,

like the feeling you get in dreams that . . . if only you could get to a certain place, or be a certain person, then you would understand everything.¹¹⁰

It can be said that all of Murnane's fiction is an exploration in search of that 'certain place'. One outcome is that to a remarkable degree his fiction is of a piece, instantly recognisable as being the product of a single vision and voice. Inevitably this also leads to speculation as to the extent to which it is autobiographical. The protagonist of all of his fiction seems to be identifiably the same character, and to bear an undeniable similarity to Murnane's personality and the circumstances of his own life. In interview, Murnane has claimed that his fiction encounters and gives account of his self at a level more profound than writing usually referred to as 'autobiographical'. He refers to Marcel Proust's expression:

le moi profond, the deep self. Now, I hide behind that expression . . . When I sit down to write (I) wasn't thinking of autobiography or of any sort of revelation. I simply wrote what I felt was uppermost in my mind. We can blame it on my deep self if it turned out to be recognisably like someone you know.¹¹¹

It is the intensity of the engagement with the 'deep self' coupled with a thematic emphasis on acts of exploration or discovery, which provide Murnane with the figure who is central to all of his fiction, that of the quester. The quester is a modern day explorer, committed to discovering and mapping the landscapes of his own life. For the quester, all landscapes, be they near or far, real or imagined, provide either the tantalising promise of life lived more fully, or the prospect of reaching other vantage points from which the landscapes of his own life can be reassessed. He knows that in many cases these are vistas that have been thoroughly explored,

mapped and occupied; but he also knows that no one has seen them exactly as he does from his unique viewpoint.

Ultimately, Murnane is writing about new ways of perceiving Australia. The Australia that is recorded in history texts and published maps is but one version of the country, and it is a version which has not been altogether successful in sustaining the quester in his search for an ideal home. So Murnane projects the quester in search of another version – a version which in the first instance is true to the vision of the quester himself, but which will ultimately reveal something about the shared experience of ‘Australia’.

‘LONGER AND MORE CHALLENGING JOURNEYS’: *TAMARISK ROW*

Any attempt to explain Murnane’s fiction must include an account of his first novel, *Tamarisk Row* (1974).¹¹² Imre Salusinszky has described *Tamarisk Row* as being ‘nothing less than the Great Code of Murnane’s imaginative iconography’¹¹³. The novel features images utilising horse races, racing silks, calendars, colours, birds, plains, grasslands, tunnels, creeks and rivers, Catholic rituals, marbles, freckles, and books and libraries, and all have been used with remarkable consistency by Murnane in his subsequent fiction. *Tamarisk Row* also begins charting the explorations of the quester. In *Tamarisk Row* he is called Clement Killeaton, although in much of Murnane’s later writing he will be unnamed.

Clement is an only child, the son of Augustine and Jean Killeaton, and is nine when the novel opens in late 1947. The Killeatons are living in the inland Victorian town of Bassett, which is closely modelled on Bendigo, where Murnane lived for several years as a child. The novel unfolds through a series of nearly one hundred vignettes that record Augustine’s spiral into gambling-induced debt which eventually forces him to flee the town with his family.

The major focus of the novel, however, is the complex imaginative life of young Clement. Clement’s physical environment is the streets,

backyards, shops and schoolyards of Bassett. What distinguishes Clement's view of this world, however, is his capacity to embellish his otherwise mundane surroundings by creating an elaborate parallel 'reality'.

Clement does not believe that the world is as it seems. He senses that there is another world waiting to be discovered, which lies beyond, or is somehow concealed by, the streets of Bassett. Clement is certain that if he can just discover a certain landscape which seems always to elude him, or view his familiar landscapes from a new angle, then he will reach a point of revelation which will enable him to make sense of the world and his place in it. He is looking for somewhere which exists as 'a country deep inside what people who live near its borders call the country' (30).

Clement's imaginative world and his search for the ideal landscape take several forms. At times his search is based on the physical landscapes of Bassett. He believes that there are secret places in the town, known to some others but hidden from normal view, which if discovered will either reveal the true meaning of the town, or will provide a view of the town which will disclose patterns not visible in the usual view from the streets and footpaths.

At other times Clement relies upon his imagination to produce replicas of promising landscapes he believes exist in some remote part of the country. Therefore an apparently ordinary aviary represents to Clement a miniaturised version of Australia, where mountains, deserts and forests lie waiting to be explored in search of the revelatory landscape; or he builds his own versions of ideal landscapes, as he does with the miniature 'farmland' he creates in the backyard of the Killeaton house.

On yet other occasions, Clement explores 'landscapes' which are even less tangible. Therese Riordan's 'foxy glen'; various Catholic icons, particularly rosary beads; scenes from American films; the backgrounds of pictures on holy cards and in comic books; the travels of gypsies; the colours of marbles; and the 'creatures' created from

the reflections of the coloured glass which 'travel' across the hallway of the Killeaton house, are all used by Clement as a way of imagining and exploring landscapes. For Clement, the landscapes he sees using these devices reflect his own uncertainty and insecurity about the place he inhabits. He wants to explore new places, in the hope that they offer a better home, or a more challenging environment, or greater mysteries, than he finds in the landscapes of Bassett.

Invariably Clement's view of these competing landscapes constructs them as a choice between exploring the unknown, mysterious and possibly dangerous region of an inland plain offering hope of a new and truer home, or a retreat into a previously occupied place which offers some certainty and security but without the hope of finding the one ideal landscape. When watching the glass creatures in the hallway he urges them to leave behind 'the green of the peopled countries' and seek out the 'richer nameless colours . . . near the last edge of the land and sky where they used to belong' (36). It is, however, a journey of great danger, and if 'the most perilous, far-reaching journeys' (171) are attempted the adventuring creature may be 'lost forever in some capricious wilderness that was never its true destination' (36).

Clement's view of the competing attractions offered by different landscapes is learnt from his father. Augustine passes on to Clement a series of tales that reflect his sense of isolation from a true homeland. Augustine tells Clement that they are shut out of parts of the world; that there exist places and landscapes where important events have happened or are happening, and in which they cannot share. Augustine tells Clement that Australia is no longer the Garden of Eden it was before his forefathers arrived, because 'the Irish who landed in Australia came too late to see the country as it had been for thousands of years when only scattered tribes of Aborigines wandered through it (and) did as they pleased' (118). Augustine also feels excluded from the modern Australia because of his Catholicism, as the Catholics were too late arriving in Australia to

make it a Catholic country and as a result 'the lands of Australia would always be covered by roads and farms and suburbs of cities in patterns that bigoted Protestants and Masons had laid out' (118).

Augustine and Clement feel shut out of the places that will provide them with either the comfort of a true home or the feeling of belonging to a community which might make their exile tolerable. They are exiles-turned-explorers, and serve as a prototype for subsequent representations of the quester. Indeed, it is Augustine's dreams of exploring inland landscapes that have led the family to Bassett and in turn shaped Clement's view of the world. Augustine is the first of many of Murnane's characters to be fascinated by the interior of the continent, and in particular the possibilities represented in open plains and grasslands. Each year since he was a young man Augustine has planned a 'journey in the only direction that has ever attracted him . . . through the dusty Mallee to the great inland zone that is coloured orange-red on maps' (6). For Augustine the inland plains are a landscape 'in which people like themselves could see in certain directions as far as any of the saints and holy people saw', and where he 'might trace longer and more challenging journeys' (150).

In addition to the inland being a source of revelation, Augustine also dreams that it is a landscape which he might yet be the first to settle, and where a Catholic empire can be created by those who are exiles from landscapes which have been explored and settled by other people. Augustine tells Clement they can,

dream of plains far inland that are probably too harsh anyway but where perhaps a few Catholic families could live in a little community whose roads led only to properties within the settlement and nowhere else beyond it. (118)

Clement therefore learns that the plains represent a chance to create a new home which promises both security and revelation.

Whether they seemingly offer security or revelation, however, the inland plains serve in Murnane's fiction as a symbol of unfulfilled promise. The plains appear to be open and revealing landscapes, but their very openness serves only to conceal those mysteries that they seem about to disclose. Clement believes that they are 'deceptively empty places' (36), and that,

the most mysterious parts of those lands lie in the very midst of them, seemingly unconcealed and there for all to see but in fact made so minute by the hazy bewildering flatness all around them that for years they might remain unnoticed by travellers . . . (119)

Clement's imaginary journeys of discovery invariably lead him towards such beguiling places, only to find the desired landscape can suddenly shift position and be consumed by another, larger and blander plain. In order to reproduce this characteristic of the plains in his imaginary world Clement reduces his miniature farmlands to a 'fraction of their former size so that all of them will be concealed by the vastness and monotony of the backyard as if by the flatness and imprecise distances of a great plain' (119).

This tendency for what is about to be revealed to disappear from sight is integral to Murnane's many representations of plains, grasslands and inland landscapes. Just as the interior tantalised nineteenth century explorers – and indeed the empire – with its elusiveness, and always seemed to promise more than it revealed, so too Clement is in quest of inland landscapes where the expected revelation dissolves from sight as he approaches.

Indeed, the plains themselves are often unreachable. For Murnane the inland is the place where 'every landscape seems to lead back to countless places farther off, each as vast as the land which is supposed to contain them all' (36). Although Augustine is eventually forced to give up his dream of reaching the inland, he would prefer to have persevered in the 'inland place' with the 'hopeless struggle to find

some dome or mound or hill whose hundreds of closely packed layers they could peel back like pages to see what other countries they might possess' (150). Such revelations are, however, beyond his reach. The journey his family finally undertakes is in the opposite direction, to re-unite them with a community with limited aspirations, who 'think that each journey is about to bring them to some place where they may rest and be satisfied' (150).

The search for an ideal 'home' in *Tamarisk Row* is also expressed as the attempt to locate a previously undiscovered version of home in the known landscape. Clement believes that by exploring the well-trodden landscapes of Bassett he may yet discover a place that provides both the mystery and the security he is seeking. Again, it is something that Clement has learnt from his father. Augustine has explained that even amongst these familiar landscapes of Bassett, mapped and laid out as they were by Protestants, Catholics, 'might see corners that the Protestants had overlooked and which could still remind them of great mysteries just out of sight behind ordinary-looking things' (118).

Clement comes to believe that there is one reality in Bassett's regular grid-like streets and repeated patterns of housing, but he is intrigued by the other reality which seems to await exploration amongst the creeks and backyards and secret places which might yet be a suitable home for the Killeatons:

there are obscure angles and surprising convergences of far-reaching routes and secret intersections of almost-forgotten tunnels . . . and each week or month a few more dusty alleyways or mossy ledges behind parapets are forgotten by the last person who once knew even vaguely of them and form the beginnings of a mysterious district that ought to be explored all over again . . . (117–118)

Clement imagines that if he can just see Bassett from the correct point-of-view then it too can be made into a true home, one which

offers both the security of the familiar, and the excitement of mysteries which lie below a surface 'that Australians believe to be well known and explored' (53). The streets of Bassett offer a version of Australia as it was discovered, charted and settled by the Protestant empire, but Clement's restless search for what he knows as the 'real country' suggests that other histories or other means of inscribing the land may yet await discovery.

Clement's attempts at exploring beneath the regular spaces of Bassett prove no more productive than his attempt to reach the inland plains. In his boldest physical act of exploration, he follows (in a gesture reminiscent of the early exploration of Australia) the creek which winds its way through Bassett, a secret pathway which avoids the orderly streets, and which he believes will give him unexpected views of the town. The experience promises much more than it reveals. He believes he might have discovered the backyard of his girlfriend, Barbara Keenan, 'but sees nothing to suggest how Barbara might have spent all her Saturday afternoons' (181); he also believes he has discovered the place where the Protestant boys meet, but 'he walks boldly through the curtain of foliage and sees that the place has been abandoned for a long time' (182); and when he has seemingly followed the creek a long way from his own territory, he climbs up an embankment to discover that he 'is only a few hundred yards from home' (183). The landscape of Bassett refuses to disclose its mysteries.

There is an unsettling disjunction at play in these various landscapes imagined and explored by Clement. This trading in images between what is remote and unexplored, and that which is local and seemingly known, continues throughout Murnane's fiction. Helen Daniel has referred to it as 'a continuing process of severance and conjunction, of transience and possession'¹¹⁴. The quester is torn between the desire to explore more closely the streets and backyards of his own neighbourhood in the hope that they may reveal as yet undiscovered places, and the lingering thought that his

real homeland may be elsewhere, over the horizon amidst landscapes as yet unexplored.

As an explorer of these competing landscapes, however, Clement is a failure. Whether he is mentally exploring remote landscapes or physically trying to penetrate the places he knows so well, he is equally incapable of revealing the 'real country'. The fate of both Augustine and Clement as explorers is mimetic of that which befell many explorers of inland Australia: they fail to penetrate the interior or to discover a suitable setting for the new homeland. Just as Oxley was forced to retreat to the coast while believing that he was within reach of the inland sea, so to Augustine and Clement eventually return to the Western District, certain that the desired landscape was just beyond their reach and still awaits discovery.

It is not only the quester's search for the ideal landscape and the new homeland that find their first expression in *Tamarisk Row*. The novel also presents the first manifestation in Murnane's fiction of a closely related search: that which is undertaken for the ideal woman. Early in the novel, Augustine's betrothal to Jean Glossop is described using a conjunction of images that become crucial to the imaginative life of Clement and subsequent renderings of the male quester. Augustine, having decided that he will marry Jean,

asks God to help him explain to her something about the long journeys that have made his life so different from other men's and the wide strange places that he may still have to go on looking for even after they are married and he has explored all over her body . . . (13)

The primary objective of the 'exploration' undertaken by the quester is for the unique, revelatory point in the landscape; but it is frequently united with a second goal, that of the ideal partner in the form of the sexualised female who will in turn serve as another site that needs to be located and explored as a landmark on the journey

toward the desired landscape.

The confluence between geographic and sexual/amatory desire was not unknown in Australian exploration. Manning Clark concluded that Charles Sturt was driven back to exploration in middle age in order to 'find the means to act up to the impulse of his heart to impress his wife'¹¹⁵; and Robert O'Hara Burke won his place as leader of the Victorian Exploring Expedition largely in the hope of achieving some return of his hitherto unrequited affection for an actress, Julia Matthews. Indeed Christina Thompson has suggested that,

The explorer narrative is a romantic narrative: the story of desire protracted, fulfilment denied, success in the form of surrender and death. One might go further and say that, like all romantic tales, it is analogically a sexual narrative.¹¹⁶

It must be noted that exploration in Australia was an almost exclusively male preserve, and the resulting discourses of discovery and occupation have been read as expressions of masculine authority and dominion. Kay Schaffer and Simon Ryan¹¹⁷ have both noted the extent to which colonial accounts of exploration and settlement in Australia render the land as female. Ryan argues that by inscribing the land in feminine terms, explorers were aiding the process by which the Australian landscape was constructed as a blank space inviting penetration and occupation by the European male.

Phallogocentric discourse positions man as creator of meaning, and woman as the bearer of this meaning . . . The land (woman) is blank until controlled and inscribed by manly European culture.¹¹⁸

Something of the same effect is present in Murnane's fiction. Certainly women and landscapes are both idealised and constructed as the repositories of meaning. Neither women nor landscapes,

however, are viewed by Murnane with the eye of the coloniser. As an explorer, the quester comes not to impose himself or to act as an agent of imperialist/masculine expansion, but rather in a spirit of sceptical yet strangely earnest enquiry induced by the presence of the 'otherness' represented in unknown places and women. Murnane's fiction acknowledges that even surfaces that appear to be blank are the repositories of elaborate levels of meaning, and that those meanings will shift endlessly according to the perspective of the viewer. The quester's gaze is not that of the imperialist explorer and cartographer fixing the landscape on charts designed to serve the empire, but rather of the puzzled individual seeking to bring meaning to his own life. He does not attempt to impose meaning upon the *tabula rasa* presented by different landscapes and women, but rather to extract those inherent meanings that are concealed beneath apparently bland surfaces and plains.

In *Tamarisk Row* the search for the revelatory landscape and the related sexual exploration are brought together in the scenes that occur at the Wallaces' aviary. At the back of his grocery shop Mr Wallace keeps a marvellous aviary stocked with Australian birds. He is the father of Margaret Wallace, who spends her time playing near the aviary. Clement goes to the aviary to play with Margaret, and he develops a fixation with the 'inland' parts of the cage that cannot be seen from the outside. He sees in the aviary a vision of Australia in miniature which promises him hope of gaining access to distant landscapes.

Behind the wire the dense shrubs and trees are planted in the shape of landscapes from every part of Australia. Hidden among the grasslands and scrub and forests and swamps and deserts are the nests of nearly every species of Australian bird. Somewhere past the dangling black and yellow of regent honey-eaters and the elusive crimson and turquoise of paradise parrots Margaret Wallace . . . is building a bower like the satin bower-birds' – a velvety resting-place enclosing more secrets than any dome-shaped nest of wrens . . . (2)

For Clement the secret of the inland parts of the aviary become enmeshed with his fascination with the mystery of the opposite sex represented by the secretive Margaret. As befits his age, Clement's sexual curiosity is at a comparatively infantile stage, expressed as a desire to discover something of the topography of the female sex organs. He believes that if he could only explore the inside of the aviary with Margaret he would also be free to explore the secrets of her genital landscape, her own 'velvety resting-place'. At their first encounter he is shut out of the aviary but he,

still hopes that one day the two of them will pull down each other's pants and stare at each other in a secluded place like an aviary. (2)

Clement perseveres in visiting the Wallaces' backyard, but Margaret keeps him firmly locked outside the aviary. She understands the extent to which he is tormented by his desire to join her in the aviary, and she teases him with descriptions of the landscapes that lie at its centre.

She boasts to Clement that she is going out of sight behind tall clumps of trees surrounding a shallow grassy swamp that her father has copied from some coastal paddock in the far south-west of Victoria . . . When she returns he asks her what kind of country lies inland behind the cold swamps. Margaret tells him she has seen pleasant plains where the trees stand wide apart . . . and clouds of green parrots rise up from the tall grass ahead of a traveller. (63)

Margaret Wallace is aware of the sexual/territorial power that she wields over Clement. She taunts the boy with the thought that the inland zone of the aviary promises a form of revelation that promises to reveal the true meaning of the landscape, and by analogy, her bodyscape.

When Clement asks her to tell him more, she says that beyond even the last inland place that she has told him about there may be a region so luminous that even her father who owns the whole aviary is not sure where it begins and ends because in certain weathers even the rocks and hills and bare grasses near the outer fences seem to flash for a few moments with its colour. Her father has crossed the aviary from one side to the other several times without seeing anything very remarkable but he still prefers to travel within the greener parts around its perimeter because he suspects there may be something too bright and powerful about the inmost area. Clement begs her to let him inside to see for himself whether there is something strange at the centre . . . (64)

The image of the mysterious and illuminating centre as embodied in the aviary is, however, far from simple, in that it carries the same duality that Clement imagines in other landscapes. Not only does the centre of the aviary promise to be a source of geographic/sexual revelation, but it also tempts Clement as a possible place for developing a safe home with a supportive woman at his side. For if what Margaret Wallace hides in her pants promises Clement one form of discovery – a revelation equal to that which is promised by the luminous inland – then she also represents the ideal female partner he must locate in order to fulfil his hope for settlement and family amidst a secure landscape.

Clement asks has she noticed places where people might settle and arrange squares of streets with clusters of gardens between, and she tells him that beyond the farthest place that she has reached the grass grows less abundantly and a huddle of low inviting hills sprawls around a vaguely defined creek-bed . . . She claims that whenever she chooses she may go and make her home in that tempting place . . . Clement tells her she will need a husband or a boy-friend. She answers that there may be a man already living

there in a hut alone who will choose her for his wife and teach her all about the place, or that a boy . . . may go on ahead of her and be the first man to explore the place and become the owner of it all and plant a lawn and garden and send for her . . . (63)

Margaret repeatedly refuses Clement's plea to be admitted into the aviary or to show herself to him. The most she will do is tempt him even further by seeming about to draw aside the barriers which separate Clement from the landscapes he desires. She dances before him with her dress held up but showing only her pants as 'a smooth white slope stretching down from her belly' (27), and:

She . . . teases him by holding aside the thick barrier of rushes that hides the inland part of the aviary. He tries to make out the flat drier country behind her but a tall spike catches Margaret's dress and as it springs back into place exposes almost the whole of her pants without her knowing it. (65)

The wire grill of the cage acts as a veil around the interior landscape of the cage, and Margaret's pants form a veil around the topography of the girl. Both separate Clement from the secrets he wishes to explore. He is therefore kept apart from both the 'region so luminous' and the new home, both of which seem to be within reach if only he can explore the inland of the aviary with a girl by his side.

Shortly before the Killeatons leave Bassett, Clement makes a final visit to the Wallace house. He realises this is his last chance to explore the interior of the aviary and Margaret Wallace's private landscape. When Margaret again refuses to cooperate, Clement throws her to the ground, and in an assault on the veil that has stood between himself and the landscapes of his dreams he 'struggles to tear down her thick white pants' (184). Momentarily, Clement believes he may have achieved his goal:

he sees clearly among the biscuit crumbs clinging to her thighs and belly a low white ridge split by a narrow unpromising fissure but with nothing else to distinguish it from the pale slopes around, so that any man or boy who chanced on such a place after years of searching would probably still go on looking for the strange shape he was really after. (185)

At what is seemingly his moment of triumph as an 'explorer', however, Clement finds his goal again recedes into a mirage-like haze. He is uncertain as to what he has discovered, and his tentative claim of success is rapidly undermined.

He says – now I've seen what I always wanted to see when I asked you to take me in and show me the secret parts of the aviary. She says – you must be nuts – I've got things hidden in there that you'll never see . . . She tells him that he'll never know what happens to them because he doesn't know what they look like and it doesn't matter if he comes back to look for them every day after she has gone and searches for them in every corner of the aviary, he'll never know whether he just missed finding them or whether he was looking at them for hours and didn't know it. She pulls her pants up tightly under her dress. (185)

Clement leaves Margaret Wallace and the aviary behind. His explorations have revealed almost nothing of what he hoped to find, and the veil, in the form of both the cage and of Margaret's pants, has again been drawn around the secret places. Clement has been lured by enticing but deceptive landscapes, only to discover that 'even the ordinary hills and plains in that country are not really what they seem to be' (185).

Clement's frustrated quest for the discovery of either a revelatory landscape or the new homeland in the interior evokes the dreams

and the disappointments suffered by the explorers of inland Australia. And Clement, like the explorers, perseveres despite his failure. He too is led on, either by a mirage or a promising horizon, or by the stubborn belief that the empire expanding landscapes or the personal rewards offered by the discovery of the centre must surely be at hand.

The Wallaces' aviary and other manifestations of Clement's desire for either a more supportive and/or a more challenging homeland renew the dream of discovering a real heart in the centre of the continent. Clement's coveted landscapes, however, can never be real in the usual sense, in that in so far as they exist it is as the 'inland sea' of his imagination. They are desirable but unattainable (and by any normal measure, non existent) places which are distinguished by their mirage-like tendency to evaporate before the explorer's gaze.

For a remarkably long time, the hopes of explorers for monumental discovery in the interior became attached to the myth of the inland sea, which may or may not in fact have been a sea, but perhaps a vast expanse of fertile land which was logically supposed to exist in order to balance the sterile bulk of the continent. The persistence of belief in the existence of the inland sea into the second half of the nineteenth century was testimony to the growing sense that the land had somehow failed its discoverers. Successive generations of Australians have had to come to terms with this empire-defeating absence in the heart of the continent, a disappointment made more bitter by the expectations which were held for the region. Judith Wright has noted that 'The central core of the country where early arrivals had hoped to find an inland sea . . . came as a shock and frustration that may have darkened all our view'¹¹⁹, and Christopher Koch has claimed that:

The sea that wasn't there has taunted the Australian soul ever since; and despite the temperate beauties and fertility of our eastern and southern seabords, we've been suspicious since then of paradise on earth, and of easy answers.¹²⁰

Robert Kenny has written that 'all of Murnane's protagonists are natives of the Inland Sea, the home they cannot travel to, but will always give allegiance to'¹²¹. Although Kenny is right to link Murnane's characters to the allure of the inland sea, the quester is no more a 'native' of that region than were the inland explorers. Like the explorers, the quester is a frustrated outsider, retaining a belief that the 'inland sea' exists alongside the fertile and revelatory interior, but he remains locked out of that part of the continent as surely as Clement is locked out of the aviary.

'THE SECOND GREAT AGE OF EXPLORATION': *THE PLAINS*

As the Killeaton family travel back towards the Western District, they 'look out across the plains where the oldest and wealthiest families in Victoria live in sprawling mansions out of sight on their huge properties' (188). It is these plains and the preoccupations of those who live in the 'sprawling mansions' which provided the subject matter for Murnane's third novel, *The Plains*.¹²²

The quester, assuming the guise of an unnamed film-maker and narrator, returns to the region of the inland plains in an aggressive attempt to discover their meaning. His identity is re-established immediately, and his connections to Clement Killeaton are obvious. The narrator tells his reader that he has lived on the plains for twenty years, 'looking for anything in the landscape that seemed to hint at some elaborate meaning behind appearances' (9). He explains that 'the flat land around me seemed more and more a place that only I could interpret' (9), and declares that of the people who have preceded him in this district 'not one has seen the view of the plains that I am soon to disclose' (11).

The status of these plains on which the quester finds himself is profoundly ambiguous, as is the film-maker's need to 'interpret' them. Geographically, the location of the plains is not specified, although the narrator tells us that in reaching them he had 'left

Australia' (9). The plains are, however, represented as being physically united with Australia; indeed those who live there (who refer to themselves as plainsmen) 'felt themselves encircled by Australia' (12), and they adopt the usage 'Inner Australia' to refer to the plains, and 'Outer Australia' to identify other areas of the continent. The plains are therefore represented as being the interior of, but somehow separate from, Australia. Murnane seems to have had a physical model in mind for his plains, having stated that:

(I) see the Plains in my mind as stretching roughly from Hamilton or Ballarat to somewhere near Alice Springs: a Western District of Victoria magnified about ten times . . . I wanted the places that I'd dreamed about to be vast enough for me to think that I would never come to the end of my dreams.¹²³

Certainly the plainsmen see themselves as the custodians of values that are distinctively Australian. They believe their landscape is the true repository of meaning about the continent, and the nearer a home is placed to the 'putative centre' of the plains, the closer it is considered to be to 'some ideal source of cultural influence' (21). One group of plainsmen is committed to,

an elaborate scheme for transforming Australia into a Union of States whose seat of government was far inland and whose culture welled up from the plains and spilled outwards. (33)

Outer Australia, on the other hand, consists of the 'sterile margins of the continent' (25), and the coastal fringes are seen by the plainsmen as 'a mere borderland where truly Australian customs were debased by contact with the Old World' (33–34). Outer Australia is populated by a vacuous and pleasure-seeking population who know nothing of the life on the plains, and to the plainsmen it is

'an anti-nation compounded of the negatives of all the attributes of Inner Australia' (36)

Murnane's construction of the plains draws upon and subverts the prevailing conception of the relationship between the geographic and intellectual centres of life in Australia. That is, it is generally understood that the cities on the continent's fringe are the places from which Australians interpret themselves and their place in the world. In Murnane's version of Australia, however, those who possess the curiosity to explore the meaning of the continent – as embodied in the plains – are situated near its physical locus. The inhabitants of Outer Australia are seen as being both physically and temperamentally separated from the true meaning of the continent, as they sit 'staring all day from their cheerless beaches at the worst of all deserts' (53).

The plains represent the opportunity to create a new and true version of Australia. It is this sense of opportunity which links Murnane's view of the plains to the novel's epigraph, which is derived from Thomas Mitchell's *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, at the moment when Mitchell first looked over the plains of south-western Victoria and announced that 'We had at length discovered a country ready for the immediate reception of civilised man'. It is one of the few moments in the journals of Australian exploration that is constructed as an unmitigated triumph for the expanders of the empire. Murnane's novel, however, is concerned with other forms of exploration – those which the civilized man is called upon to make after the maps have been drawn, the names allocated, the fences built, and the profits made.

The plainsmen are certainly a type of 'civilised man'. They are wealthy landowners, who use their estates as the foundation for an elaborate system of patronage whereby they sponsor research into the nature of the plains and the development of complex codes by which the relationship between the plains and their families can be expressed. Amongst those to benefit from this patronage are writers, historians, artists, heraldists, designers, and eventually the film-

maker. They are provided not only with financial support, but also with access to the vast estate libraries that form the collective history of the exploration, settlement and interpretation of the plains.

For the plainsmen, the period of the physical exploration of the plains is crucial to their conception of the unique space they occupy. As the film-maker realises, 'The exploration of the plains had been the major event in their history' (15), its importance signified by 'cairns of stones on every hillside and plaques beside roads and inscriptions still preserved on treetrunks' (49). More than just providing them with a place to live, the period of physical exploration has also given them a way to live. In exploring and settling a landscape which had 'at first seemed utterly flat and featureless' the plain's dwellers have learnt to distinguish the 'countless subtle variations of landscape' which would have eluded a less discriminating eye. As a result they have developed into unusually close and patient observers of both physical and non-physical phenomena, who do not demand that form or meaning be obvious. They have become 'receptive to (the) gradual revelations of meaning' (15) embodied in their featureless landscape.

As a consequence the physical exploration of the plains has now given way to the 'Second Great Age of Exploration', in which attention has shifted away from the plains themselves, and towards various representations of the plains and their impact on the lives of those who live there. The later generations of plainsmen still see themselves as explorers, but they now seek to discover what the plains mean rather than what they look like. They have,

responded to life and art as their forebears had confronted the miles of grassland receding into the haze. They saw the world itself as one more in an endless series of plains. (15)

Murnane's construction of the plains landscape is further complicated, however, in that they also exist at a level different from

any supposed physical reality. In *Tamarisk Row* Murnane had already begun developing a conceit which allowed that plains exist not only as a physical feature, but that each landscape is a plain which may allow access to other plains, which in themselves may be grounded in a physical space, or perhaps be a manifestation of some other reality altogether, in particular 'time'. To Clement the place he knows as Bassett can be represented not only as a space, but equally well by the grid-like 'patterns of squares' he sees on a calendar and which can also 'give some meaning to the continual journeyings of children or men' (150).

As *The Plains* progresses and the film-maker becomes increasingly isolated from the supposedly physical plains which surround him, and more concerned with the way in which these plains are refracted and reconstituted in his own mental images, their basis in any 'reality' is called into question. Do the plains have a physical 'existence' beyond the imagination of the film-maker, or are they simply a device he uses for furthering his exploration of ideas of the self and how it relates to space and time?

Both readings are possible. According to the first, the quester's exploration is of the meanings contained in physical landscapes known as 'the plains', and in order to explore those meanings he must examine his perceptions of the plains as they are filtered through his ways of seeing, knowing and perceiving both space and time. According to the second, however, the plains are independent of any physical reality, and exist only as an abstract means to further his conjecturing about his real field of exploration; that is, his own mindscape as refracted through his perception of time and space. In this latter case the quester's first level examination is of his own mindscape, and the image of the plains and its relationship to Outer Australia exists only as a means of dramatising the relationship between the 'inner' life of the film-maker and his external world. As he postulates,

the boundaries of true nations were fixed in the souls of men. And according to the projections of real, that is spiritual geography, the plains clearly did not coincide with any pretended land of Australia. (38)

This dilemma, as to whether one should be exploring the external physical landscape or the internal private 'landscape' is known to the plainsmen. As one of the plains philosophers expresses the problem:

Anyone surrounded from childhood by an abundance of level land must dream alternately of exploring two landscapes – one continually visible but never accessible and the other always invisible even though crossed and recrossed daily. (38)

The first is the plainsmen's shared physical landscape, apparently available to all for discovering and exploring, but which ultimately resists any common understanding; and the second is the plainsman's personal territory, his mindscape, which he encounters every day but which can never be made tangible in such a way that it allows access to others.

This dilemma also finds expression in a philosophical divide between the plainsmen. For although they share a dedication to the continued exploration of the plains, they disagree as to how this should be achieved. They are divided in their support for one or other of two major factions, the Horizonites and the Haremen. The philosophies of these two groups are a further expression of the conflicting impulse to explore either the distant, imagined landscapes or those that are local and physical.

The Horizonites look further inland, beyond their immediate surroundings and towards the haze, or the veil, that shrouds the horizon. They are drawn on by the desire to explore the further plains that lie just beyond their known world.

[They] argued that the zone of haze was as much a part of the plains as any configuration of soil and clouds. They said they esteemed the land of their birth for the very reason that it seemed bounded continually by the blue-green veil that urged them to dream of a different plain. (27)

The Haremen, on the other hand, prefer to explore the plains they currently occupy, and believe that the inhabitants of the plains can continue to find mystery in their own well-travelled landscape. The founder of The Haremen,

wanted the people of the plains to see their landscape with other eyes; to recover the promise, the mystery even, of the plains . . . His group utterly rejected the supposed appeal of misty distances. They were pledged to find grand themes in the weathered gold of their birthplace. (29)

The film-maker looks at the reconciliation of this dispute between the Horizonites and the Haremen as his means of making a contribution to the intellectual life of the plains. He has read an article about the plains, in which the author 'had postulated the existence of a landscape where a plainsman might finally resolve the contradictory impulses that his native land gave rise to', and he believes that he is 'admirably equipped to explore this landscape and reveal it to others' (38). As he awaits his chance to meet with the landowners and seek their patronage he believes he is 'destined to reconcile in my own life, or better still, in my film, all the conflicting themes arising from the old quarrel' (25).

The film-maker therefore casts himself in the role of an explorer of a new landscape, or a new plain, which will reconcile the conflicting positions held by the plainsmen. He is encouraged in this belief by the landowners. When he finally has his opportunity to entreat their support for his project, a film to be titled *The Interior*, he must first sit

and listen as six of the landowners conduct a conversation about the nature of the plains. They are discussing the exploration of the plains, examining the different ways a plainsman can 'explore' in order to advance his understanding of the plains and their meaning.

The 1st Landowner sees the exploration of skin markings on his 'ideal woman' as an analogy of the search for the truth about the plains; the 2nd Landowner both engages the 1st Landowner and develops an argument about a ground dwelling bird, the bustard, being an example of an exemplary plains dweller; the 4th and the 6th Landowners also borrow from the 1st Landowner's discussion about shadings on the skin of women, and develop a separate argument based on the role of poetry and art in revealing the unique aspects of the light which colours the plains. In the positions put by these landowners can be heard the countervailing voices of the Horizonites and the Haremen, and they all draw upon the language of cartography and exploration in order to support their arguments.

4th Landowner . . . If I made maps of all your skins. I mean, of course, projections like Mercator's. If I showed them all to you, would you recognise your own? I might even point out to you marks like tiny scattered towns or clumps of timber on plains you've never thought of, but what could you tell me about these places? (50)

6th Landowner . . . There must be many a man who knew, without leaving his own narrow district of the plains, that his heart enclosed every land he could have travelled to; that his fantasies of scorching sand and vacant blue water and bare brown skin belonged not to any coast but to some mere region of his own boundless plain. (57)

However, it is the 3rd and 5th Landowners who directly debate 'This obsession with explorers' (49) which is common to plainsmen.

In doing so they further describe the dualities and uncertainties which are embodied in the plains and which impede the modern-day artist-explorers as they attempt to discover a united view of life on the plains. Their discussion continues to project the plains as both a physical place to be explored ('I retained a surveyor and an historian to prepare a map of all the strips of territory between the settled districts . . .' (55)), and an abstract construction of their desire for an ideal homeland ('I can't believe that even our plains could equal this land we all dream of exploring. And yet I believe that land is only another plain. Or at least it must be approached by way of the plains around us' (52)).

The discussion between the 3rd and 5th Landowners is about what exploration means in the Second Great Age of Exploration, an age for those 'born too late to be the conventional sort of explorer' (53). The landowners realise that this is no longer an era in which exploration can be conducted in terms of the discovery and mapping of unrecorded land. They now need to find a way of using the landscape as a point of departure, as they attempt to enhance their empire by understanding what the plains *mean* rather than how they *look*.

The two landowners consider a number of methods by which such exploration can proceed. The 5th Landowner argues the case of the Haremen, believing that despite the periods of exploration and settlement, the plains still 'haven't been thoroughly explored'. He recounts the story of the landowner who, believing that 'exploration was the only activity worthy of a plainsman' (53–54), spent years drawing detailed maps of his property, carefully naming every feature. At the end of this process he locked the maps away and invited others to,

explore the same place after him and write a description of it. When the two descriptions were compared the differences between them would reveal the distinctive qualities of each man: the only qualities that he could claim as his own. (54)

In this Second Great Age of Exploration, a space is explored not for its own sake, but as a means of understanding the explorer himself. According to this Hareman view of the world, this is achieved by measuring your perception of a familiar landscape – or at least the representations in maps and journals by which you record those perceptions – against those of another observer.

This position reflects a contemporary understanding of the notion of exploration. That is, according to traditional concepts of exploration, the explorers project themselves and their meanings onto the land as part of the act of exploring, describing and naming it; what is new, however, is the understanding that this process will reflect upon the qualities of the explorers themselves. The land is not simply a blank upon which meaning can be written; but in so far as it is capable of absorbing meaning it can also reflect those meanings in such a way that they illuminate the observer. The man who would be an explorer in this age must be prepared to discover something about himself as well as the places he traverses and describes.

The 3rd Landowner argues the case of the Horizonites, and in doing so he too rejects traditional notions of exploration. According to this landowner the task of exploring is more than the taking possession of spaces encountered, but rather it is a creative act in which the explorer expresses his imaginative self by projecting himself into ever more distant landscapes.

I happen to believe that we are all explorers in our way. But exploration is much more than naming and describing. An explorer's task is to postulate the existence of a land beyond the known land. Whether or not he finds that land and brings back news of it is unimportant. He may choose to lose himself in it forever and add one more to the sum of unexplored lands. (54)

In this process the discovered land is of little interest, except in so far as it serves as a boundary separating the space which the imagination

has already encountered from those new spaces where explorers still have the freedom to speculate about new meanings or ways of being. Whereas traditional concepts of exploration demand a description of newly explored land as an important part of the creation and occupation of that space, to the Horizonite such matters are ephemeral. Rather than imposing himself upon the new space by reducing it to a set of names and descriptions that can be used to make it known to others, this explorer is prepared to be absorbed by the meanings which he 'discovers' in the new land; meanings which at least in part are derived from his own act of journeying and exploration. The emphasis is on the journey, not the discovery; and on the search for personal space rather than the acquisition of shared 'imperial' space.

In their discussion the two landowners are struggling towards some amalgamation of the vision of the Haremen and the Horizonites; a means of reconciling the desire to reveal the mystery that remains in what is local with the urge to explore new lands that beckon from beyond the familiar landscapes. The 5th Landowner concludes the discussion with a statement which puts his own position as a Hareman, but also encapsulates the ongoing dilemma facing all plains dwellers.

Every plainsman knows he has to find his place. The man who stays in his native district wishes he had arrived there after a long journey. And the man who travels begins to fear that he may not find a fitting end to his journey. I've spent my life trying to see my own place as the end of a journey I never made. (58)

When the time comes for the film-maker to promote his project to the plainsmen he explains to them that he is the one artist who 'could satisfy the contradictory impulses of the plainsman':

of all forms of art, only film could show the remote horizons of dreams as a habitable country and, at the same time, could turn

familiar landscapes into a vague scenery fit only for dreams.
(60)

He also adopts the plainsman's imagery of exploration in order to describe his proposed project:

I believed that every man was called to be an explorer. My own film would be in one sense the record of a journey of exploration . . . (60)

What the film-maker is proposing for the Second Great Age of Exploration is a film version of an explorer's journal; a visual text which will record his attempt to reach a plain that has hitherto eluded the plainsmen and the artists and intellectuals they retained to assist them.

The film-maker's proposal attracts a patron, and his search for the new plain commences. This is not, however, normal exploration with its connotations of an active and physical pursuit of new land. As an explorer of the Second Great Age of Exploration the film-maker is a contemplative man whose 'journey' is entirely intellectual. As he works upon his project he consciously avoids the heat, light and space of the flat expanses which encircle the house and which are supposedly his field of discovery. He increasingly confines himself to the house of his patron, and eventually isolates himself ever further within the cool, dark alcoves of the library.

The film-maker's project again brings about the transposed desire for the idealised landscape and the idealised female which featured in *Tamarisk Row*. He announces to the landowners that 'whenever I approached a woman I wanted nothing better than to learn the secret of a particular plain' (60) and he believes that by using the daughter of his patron as the central character of his film he will unite the opposing views of the Haremen and the Horizonites. He will achieve this by exploring the girl's relationship with her own landscapes.

There are no fit words to describe what I hope to do. Descry her landscapes? Explore them? I could hardly tell in words how I have come to know these plains where I first came upon her. Hopeless to speak yet of those stranger places beyond them. (70)

His exploration will include those landscapes which are familiar to her ('First I must have an intimate understanding of her own territory. I want to see her against the backdrop of the few square miles that are hers alone . . . (70)); and also those which lie beyond the limits of her known world ('I mean to see other lands that cry out for their explorer – those plains that she recognises when she gazes out from her veranda and sees anything but a familiar land' (71)).

By exploring these contrary aspects of her world, the film-maker believes that he will realise his own goal, the arrival at the plain which lies somewhere 'beyond' these other plains, and which will somehow form a unified expression of them. It is also a plain which is entirely personal to the daughter, and will serve to reveal *her* to the film-maker.

Last of all I want to venture into the plain that even she is not sure of – the places she dreams of in the landscape after her own heart. (71)

The film-maker's hope of achieving his vision by embracing that of a female partner fails him. He achieves no communication at all with his patron's daughter and his attempt to transfer his ambitions on to his patron's wife culminates in a comic sequence in which his attempt to establish communication by planting messages on the shelves of the library dissolves into farce.

In the absence of a female partner the film-maker is stripped of the vision of the unified view of the plains which sustained his original ideas for the film. In its place he is drawn into an exploration of

another school of thought, which looks not to reconcile opposing points of view but instead seeks revelation by highlighting what is unique to each individual.

How might a man re-order his conduct if he could be assured that the worth of a perception, a memory, a supposition, was enhanced rather than diminished by its being inexplicable to others? And what could a man not accomplish, freed from any obligation to search for so-called truths apart from those demonstrated by his search for a truth peculiar to him? (83)

'Time' is the plain championed by these 'doctrinal solitaires' (88). Unlike the plains that form a shared physical 'Space', Time is a plain which seemingly exists uniquely for each individual.

Time can have no agreed meaning for any two people; that nothing can be predicated of it; that all our statements about it are designed to fill up an awesome nullity in our plains and an absence from our memories of the one dimension that would allow us to travel beyond them. (89)

By exploring the plain he calls 'Time' the film-maker is led irresistibly away from the attempt to realise a unified view of the plains and towards an increasingly solitary quest. It is a journey that leads him to darkness and nothingness, while doing nothing to evince an understanding of the 'awesome nullity' of the plains which surround him. Along with the other artists assembled in the great houses on the plains he becomes increasingly isolated, and on those occasions when they come together to hear of each other's progress, they have less and less to say.

The balance of *The Plains* records the failure of the film-maker's project. He finds that rather than reconciling the contradictions of the plains, his projected film is overwhelmed by them. In the novel's

final scene the film-maker is photographed by his patron, posed with a camera in hand as if he is about to photograph a point of revelation which lies in the landscape, but outside the frame of the patron's photograph. But the film-maker has his camera reversed, his eye to the lens, not the view-finder. He is about 'to expose to the film in its dark chamber the darkness that was the only visible sign of whatever I saw beyond myself' (126). The goal of the film-maker's search is no longer to be found in the shared light of the plains which surround him, but within the dark, unrevealing and wholly personal landscapes which reside within himself.

This solipsistic and isolated gaze of the explorer of the Second Great Age of Exploration is the antithesis of the exploratory gaze of the nineteenth century. Exploration conducted in the cause of imperial expansion was underwritten by a belief in the rightness of the shared goals and values believed to be encompassed by 'Civilization' and embodied in the government, commerce, law and other by-products of the European empires. Notwithstanding the lonely journey undertaken by explorers themselves, exploration of inland Australia was predicated on an expansion of community, and new land was explored and settled not only for convenience or profit, but as a means of extending the benefits believed to be inherent in the institutions and cultural practices of the coloniser. The film-maker, however, discovers that to compete in the Second Great Age of Exploration is inevitably a solitary and isolating experience. His original plan for his film may have envisaged a unification of different views of the plains, but its end-product is a failure of his own vision which leads him on an increasingly solipsistic journey of non-discovery. His attempt to produce a shared vision of the plains has led only to a perplexed contemplation of his own empty spaces.

The Plains is open to many readings and interpretations. It is compelling, however, to read the novel as an allegory of the explorations that each person must undertake in order to establish a relationship with their land(scape), their community and their sense

of self. The novel examines the pitfalls involved in such explorations, and the vision it presents is a bleak one. Whereas the task in the 'Golden Age, the Century of Exploration' (85) was comparatively unambiguous, exploration in the Second Great Age has turned in upon itself and the gaze of the explorer has become increasingly and dangerously solipsistic. The film-maker, however, remains compulsive, seemingly unable to resist tearing at the veils which surround his goal, while growing in awareness that at best they protect a counterfeit of his real desire.

In drawing upon the inland reaches of Australia as its physical and metaphysical stage, *The Plains* reminds the reader of the promise and the eventual disappointment these areas held; a disappointment which Australians have not satisfactorily resolved. The inland setting works effectively because it was the field for the physical exploration of the continent and the space that formed the crucible of the dreams of the first age of exploration.

'A MAP OF THE TRUE PART OF YOU':

LANDSCAPE WITH LANDSCAPE AND A LIFETIME ON CLOUDS

In *Landscape With Landscape*,¹²⁴ Murnane's first major piece of fiction following *The Plains*, he further developed the persona of the quester, and it has remained almost unchanged in his subsequent fiction. He is unnamed, a failed writer of poetry and aspiring writer of fiction, who has earned his living at times by working as a school teacher and an editor. As a boy he has lived in country Victoria, as a young man in inner city Melbourne, and since his marriage in suburban Melbourne. He is a solitary and a heavy drinker and was once a Catholic. He dreams of landscapes.

The links to Clement Killeaton and the film-maker of *The Plains* are apparent. Murnane's fiction, however, has undergone a slight but perceptible shift since *The Plains* which is manifested in the nature of the exploration undertaken by the quester. Whereas the

early novels dealt with the occupation of spaces that were speculative, in Murnane's later fiction the quester becomes increasingly preoccupied with the re-examination of previously known landscapes. In a process which is indicative of his aging, the quester shifts the focus of his exploration to the lost landscapes of his youth. According to Imre Salusinszky, in his fiction after *The Plains* Murnane, 'turns away from the varieties of mental experience that have preoccupied him so far (dream, perception, fantasy, imagination) and focuses his attention on another kind of mental act: memory'.¹²⁵

'Landscape with freckled woman', the first of the six interlocking stories which comprise *Landscape With Landscape*, is a manifesto of the man the quester has become. He explains that as a young man he has tried to imagine and occupy the landscapes of his adult self, but that as an adult he will try to discover himself by revisiting the landscapes he knew and imagined as a child. This new search requires him to be both observer and subject, explorer and landscape.

Perhaps, the young man thought, the child's landscapes were out of sight because the man trying to see them was in the very spot where the landscapes should have been – standing in place of the man the child had dreamed about. If that was so, then whenever the man had failed . . . to see his landscape clearly he had been standing in the very places that he should have been dreaming about. He had been trying to write about places that he himself could never write about: places that must wait until some undreamed-of man came across them quite by chance. (16)

Whereas in *The Plains* the quest had been an attempted act of self-discovery based on uniting competing conceptions of space, the later incarnations of the quester attempts to 'remember' by uniting two landscapes separated by 'time'. He believes, however, that time is only a convenient form of describing landscapes that

have existed in different places, and that to remember is to re-unite oneself with another place:

there will never be any such thing as *time*. There is only *place*.
What people call time is only place after place. (*Velvet Waters*, 15)

The quester still seeks revelation, but he now believes that it will be achieved not by the discovery of new landscapes or the uncovering of mysteries which lie beneath familiar surfaces, but the capacity to unite apparently separate landscapes which describe himself at different points of his life. To the quester, an individual is identifiable only by the landscapes that he or she has occupied – landscapes which serve both to describe the occupant of those landscapes and to distinguish him or her from those who have occupied other landscapes.

Words such as *imagination* and *memory* and *person* and *self* and even *real* and *unreal* he found vague and misleading, and all the theories of psychology that he had read about as a young man begged the question *where* the mind was.¹²⁶

In the novel *Inland* the narrator/quester assumes two personalities, writing from two parts of the world, who are connected because they can imagine (and indeed create each other) across what is apparently a gulf of time and space. As the narrator in his second persona explains, the ‘chief pleasure of his life’ is,

to see two places I had thought far apart lying in fact in one place – not simply adjoining one another but each appearing to enclose or even to embody each other. (103)

Armed with his memory as a guide the quester will try and bridge the gap between the places/landscapes he currently occupies and imagines, and those he has previously occupied and imagined. His

ultimate destination is to discover the point-of-view that allows the simultaneous occupation of these two places. In the story 'First love' he paraphrases Albert Jarry:

in order to dwell in eternity, one has only to experience two separate moments at the same moment. I believe this is true whether a moment is a unit of something called time or a unit of place. (*Velvet Waters*, 171)

The discovery of the self through the act of memory is impeded, however, because the spaces he has known resist his attempt to retrace his journey across intervening landscapes.

The Bendigo he wrote about – the Bendigo of twenty years before – was a minuscule patch of brightly lit land far out of his reach. Between Bendigo and Melbourne was something he felt himself forbidden to cross. No map-maker could have found a name or a sign for this blank middle-distance of his. (*Landscape With Landscape*, 18)

The quester's emphasis on memory has seemingly reduced his field of exploration. His attempt to forge a link to the landscapes of his past has led him to an exploration of the particularities of his local landscapes at the expense of the journey into unknown and imagined territory. The veiled distances still beckon, but the emphasis is increasingly on the detailed exploration of the places with which he is familiar.

In 'Sipping the essence', one of several stories which invoke Jack Kerouac, the quester explains that:

I thought I might discover what I believe Jack Kerouac had discovered: the scope for endless journeys of exploration in what was supposed to be well-trodden territory. (49)

But whereas the Kerouac hero was a traveller, an explorer criss-crossing extensive territory, the quester realises that his own travels will be far more local:

the suburbs of Melbourne would be for me what the entire United States had been for Kerouac. Around me in the deserted streets the masses of trees and shrubs made a complex pattern of dark tunnels out of reach of the streetlights. There seemed space enough in Melbourne for a solitary to travel for years out of sight of those who huddled together. (49)

At times he still feels the urge to go beyond his horizons, announcing that he feels 'trapped in a mere corner of a huge country that I was free to explore' (49); but he is incapable of using his freedom to travel and explore as he dreams of doing. His explorations are confined to his own territory, and he increasingly believes that true exploration is the ability to see deeper than others into well-known landscapes rather than the discovery of new and unknown territory. He travels back and forth across his own space, but always seeing it with an explorer's eye. Not the explorer who sees landscapes for the first time as he works to expand the empire, but the explorer who sees familiar landscape as no one else can as he searches for his own place in the world.

As was the case in *The Plains*, however, the quester's explorations become ever more personalised, leading him not only through the suburbs and landscape of his native Melbourne, but into the most localised and darkest landscape of all, himself. Indeed it is the task he sets himself when he first decides to become a writer, and declares that he wants 'to explore *inner space*' (16). To the quester this task is the equal of other explorations that discovered continents and opened up new tracts of land. He sees within himself the equivalent of the great fields of exploration, declaring that he longs to be recognised 'as a man with a vast and foreign land

behind my face', and that, 'I began at last to feel that a whole continent was spread out inside me' (82).

Again, as in *The Plains*, the quester inevitably realises that the exploration of this inner continent is a frustrating and isolating experience. Whereas the quest for the new spaces and possibilities of the continental interior had been associated with the bright light of revelation and the quest for a shared experience, the journey into his own 'centre' is once more associated with the images of darkness and isolation that dominated the closing sections of *The Plains*. He had previously believed that 'the dark half of all I saw was only a part of the sunlit world that I had not yet understood' (214), but now realises that the darkness is a landscape which must be explored on its own terms:

Now I knew that those dark spaces were part of myself. They were a huge projection of some intricate pattern behind my eyes, and it would be my life's work to explore those dark spaces and to interpret the patterns that gave rise to them. (214)

Despite the apparent dangers the quester retains his compulsive need to explore the dark places, even if they lead him to the absence in his own centre. The darkness is another manifestation of the barren inland sea, and only by exploring and understanding that darkness will he be able to 'see my landscape as a private place marked off from all others' (25).

In his later fiction Murnane has emphasised the act of writing as a crucial element in his exploration. The quester is using his memory to explore the various landscapes that engaged him at some time in the past, and adding a second layer of exploration in the writing he uses to re-visit those earlier acts of exploration. He declares in 'A quieter place than Clun' that it is 'writing that was supposed to take us towards the places we dreamed about' (169); and in 'In far fields', he quotes Jacques Derrida: '*To write is to go in search*' (*Emerald Blue*, 17).

The act of writing fiction emerges as the quester's major tool in his search for the unique point of view he desires. Whereas the filmmaker in *The Plains* saw his mooted film as an explorer might have seen his journal – as 'the record of a journey of exploration' (54) – the writer sees his craft as an integral part of the process of exploration used to progress his search for his own unique vision.

When the quester sits down to write in *Landscape With Landscape* he notes that 'the blank page . . . had seemed the foreground of a remarkable tract of country' (9). The blank page is constructed as being like the blankness on the map that enticed explorers. It is a space to be filled, and the act of writing is to be the means of not only filling the page, but also of charting the landscapes of his inner continent. The quester 'understands that a writer has to compose long sentences leading like roads away from the country that presses at the back of his neck' (224). And whereas an explorer used his various instruments to take measurements that were then recorded in his diary, the quester's writing has become the means by which he measures his progress:

I compare the pen in my hand as I write to an instrument recording on paper the faint trembling of the earth or the wavering of the wind in the landscape of my mind. (223)

Landscape With Landscape, *Inland*, and a number of the stories which comprise *Velvet Waters* and *Emerald Blue* are centrally concerned with the act of writing as a means of (re)creating landscapes by filling the blank spaces on the page. Murnane uses his fiction to write about the use of writing as a means of exploring and discovering landscapes, and he does so in a way which makes it clear to the reader that the writing that the reader is reading is a conscious means of discovering those landscapes.

This is achieved by Murnane, in the guise of the quester/explorer/writer, addressing the reader as to *why* he writes:

I have never written any piece of fiction with the simple purpose of understanding what I might call the real world. I have always written fiction in order to suggest to myself that another world exists. (*Emerald Blue*, 213)

Or *what* he writes:

Whenever a person tells me that he or she prefers the characters in a story to have a name, I suppose that the person likes to pretend, while reading a story, that the characters in the story are living or have lived . . . Other persons may pretend whatever they choose to pretend, but I cannot pretend that any character in any story written by me or by any other person is a person who lives or has lived in the place where I sit writing these words. I see the characters in stories, including the story of which this sentence is a part, as being in the invisible place that I call my mind. (*Emerald Blue*, 74)

Or *how* he writes:

While I was writing the previous paragraph, I understood that the young woman mentioned there was listening to the words of a man who was talking about the writing of fiction. I could not see any image of the man, and I could not hear in my mind any words that the man was speaking . . . (*Emerald Blue*, 1)

The effect of such passages, in addition to contributing to a piece of fiction, is to create a record (a journal) of the writing of that fiction. The reader is reminded that the fiction they are reading is a consciously created and artificial construct, which attempts to render a version of 'reality' as it is experienced by one person only, the writer. It is not, however, that 'reality', any more than an explorer's journal was the fact of the journey. They are both repre-

sentations of the act of exploration. The explorer's journal is superficially preoccupied with the mundane necessities of exploration (finding water, feeding animals, setting camp) which enable the acts of discovery to take place; and Murnane's fiction is concerned with describing and exposing the mechanics of the writing which he hopes will eventually lead to his own discoveries.

The process of exploration (the journey in the case of the explorer, and the act of writing in the case of Murnane) becomes ever more important in the absence of discovery. Just as Ernest Giles came increasingly to indulge in the journey for its own sake as he became aware that significant discoveries were unlikely, so too Murnane has become increasingly engaged with the act of writing as his fictional journeys have led only to dark and barren places.

The act of writing is crucial to the quester's pursuit of his own landscapes, but Murnane also writes about writing as a means of realising his other goal, the ideal woman. This was the case as early as his second novel *A Lifetime on Clouds*,¹²⁷ when the only contact that Adrian Sherd has with Denise McNamara, his idealised 'girlfriend' and 'wife', is by showing her the writing on the front page of an exercise book which contains the message of his name, age and school. Adrian believes that the message is received, although the reader is far less certain. It certainly does not have the desired effect of initiating a relationship between Adrian and Denise, except in so far as one exists in Adrian's mind.

Similar failures by the quester to merge his landscapes with those of a woman by means of written communication are common in Murnane's fiction. In *The Plains* the film-maker is tantalised by the latent, unspoken relationship with his patron's wife, a relationship he envisages in terms of 'countless landscapes brought into being . . . by a wordless exchange' (96). The film-maker concocts a variety of schemes by which he will write a book containing signs of his landscapes, but which she must not actually read for fear of violating the silence that exists between them. None of the schemes he devises

seems likely to achieve his purpose, however, and eventually he resolves to 'write no book and to put abroad no suggestion that I had ever written a book or intended to write a book' (100).

Coupled with the act of writing as a means of exploration is the quester's growing interest in maps and other cartographic devices. To the quester, maps (both real and imagined) are vital to his conception of the space he occupies and how he relates to the places he has been in the past or hopes to visit in the future. He can only understand these landscapes after he has seen them in some cartographic form which links them to other landscapes he has known, and which represent his own journeying to and from these places.

By the time he reaches the stories in *Emerald Blue*, the quester declares that 'a diagram of my mind would resemble a vast and intricate map with images for its small towns and with feelings for the road through the grassy countryside'(2). When he then commences the process of writing about these 'maps' in his mind, they are in turn reconstructed as maps on his blank page.

He had done much writing, but it was all in the form of labels or detailed annotations for a series of more than a hundred maps. Each of these maps was itself an enlargement of one or another detail on an earlier map in the series, and the first map, from which all the other maps and all the text arose, was a simple representation looking more like a coat of arms than a map of any place on earth. (175-176)

The quester also spends a great deal of time studying real maps. His fascination with these maps, however, is in their framing of his own abstracted journeys, and his real interest remains in the far more personal 'maps' he imagines as recording his own journeys and explorations. He describes as his 'favourite map' that which plots the course his life has taken and might yet take.

I point to the line I have plotted from the inner northern suburb where I was born to the outer north-eastern suburb where I now live. I explain that I have been moving all my life in a north-east direction at an average velocity of 0.75 kilometres per year. I move my finger slowly across the map to show where the line will have taken me by the age of fifty.
(*Landscape With Landscape*, 217)

The quester knows that maps are not simple tools that plot only physical journeys and direct routes. To truly chart the labyrinthine explorations of his life is a matter of the utmost complexity, and any such map should record not only the places and landscapes he has physically occupied but also those which he has explored imaginatively or dreamed of reaching.

A map of the true part of you, reader, would show every place where you have been from your birthplace to the place where you sit now . . . And when every place where you have ever been on every day of your life has been marked on the map of the true part of you, why then, reader, the map has been barely marked. There are still to mark all those places you have dreamed about and all those places you have dreamed of yourself seeing or remembering or dreaming about . . . ¹²⁸

Whereas an explorer's map purported to be the unassailable public record of a shared geographic reality, maps for Murnane are highly personal and subjective representations of the quester's journey of discovery into his own mind. The imaginative, emotional, religious, sexual and other mindscapes of the quester are all capable of being represented as maps or described using cartographic tropes.

The personalised range of mapping strategies employed by the quester was evidenced in Murnane's second novel, *A Lifetime on Clouds*. Adrian Sherd frequently distorts objective cartographic

representations of space in order to create 'maps' that reflect his personal desires. The map of America he creates is designed to facilitate his nightly journeys with a succession of beautiful women to the 'America' of his dreams, in which the 'country has been twisted out of shape to make its most beautiful landscapes no more than stages in an endless journey' (13).

Adrian is aware that he has been too late in discovering and mapping the landscapes he occupies. His is a world in which landscapes have been permanently (mis)shaped by their original exploration and settlement. Of the history of his own country, 'The only part that interested Adrian was the period before Australia was properly explored' (57). He is keen to redraw the map of Australia so that it reflects his own dreamscapes, a lurid mapping of how the country *should* have been explored and charted, rather than the received view of the land as recorded by empire-serving explorers and cartographers. In doing so he corrupts the conventional histories of exploration and settlement in Australia and replaces them with his own version that subverts the records of imperial expansion in favour of a far more personal history.

Adrian had an old school atlas with a page of maps showing how Australia had been explored. In one of the first maps, the continent was coloured black except for a few yellow indentations on the eastern coast where the first settlements were. Adrian drew a much larger map with the same colour scheme, except that the dark inland was broken by tracts of a sensuous orange colour . . . They were the lost kingdoms of Australia, established in the early days by men after his own heart. (57)

In particular, Adrian concocts Australia as a keeping place for untouched civilizations, by imagining a series of nations where settlers have introduced a replica of their place of origin before that homeland was tainted by imperial expansion. The Wimmera district is

transformed into 'a replica of Baghdad in the days of Haroun Ah Rashid'; another man has turned the Ord River 'into Peru, with its own Inca and Brides of the sun', and in Bass Strait is an 'island exactly like Tahiti before the Europeans found it' (58). Adrian's imagination overwrites the imperial history of Australian exploration with his own colourful version, and in doing so he reinvents the geography of his country and redraws its maps to include 'the things that might have happened' (58).

When each later incarnation of the quester dedicates himself to becoming a writer, he also begins creating similar maps. These are maps that present a version of the geography of the place he occupies, but again are overwritten with images of the personal landscape he will attempt to explore with his writing:

The young man believed he might draw a map of a city beyond the reach of normal perception and only faintly recalling the city where he had lived his early life. The suburbs and districts in the new city would be sized and spaced according to the intensity of poetic feeling he had once felt in this or that part of another Melbourne. (*Landscape With Landscape*, 12–13)

The maps therefore are integral to the process by which the quester tries to project himself into new landscapes or to remember the landscapes of his past. However, as he comes to realise, the maps he creates do not record any real discovery. They chart his wanderings and record something of his dreams, but they never record the encounter with the real country of his dreams. As with many Australian explorers, he will be known by his journeys rather than his discoveries.

In his story 'The only Adam', Murnane again features the moment of Thomas Mitchell's discovery of Australia Felix which served as the epigraph to *The Plains*. The schoolboy narrator (identified as 'A'), is given the task of showing his classmates a film of Mitchell's explorations. The dotted path tracing the expedition unfolds on the screen until the climactic moment of the great discovery, at which time 'A' 'could only look at the land on the screen and wonder what he himself could discover to compare with it' (*Velvet Waters*, 63). The answer is nothing. Mitchell remains, as he called himself, the 'only Adam' in Australia's history. 'A' makes some thwarted attempts to make some discoveries about his landscape and those of the girl Nola Pomeroy, but he realises that 'It was too late for exploring' (69), and that opportunities for great discovery have passed.

What remains in the absence of discovery is the journey, but this too must be mapped. The quester believes that he is 'a man with something of a map defining me' (*Landscape With Landscape*, 164), and that map is the course of his travels, both real and imagined, in the failed search for his real country. So he creates what he calls the 'finger web', as he sits and ponders his maps and traces his slow journey across the suburbs of Melbourne, ever deeper into an ever smaller landscape, and ever further into himself. And he is left to puzzle at the route the map takes and the pace at which it unfolds, as it plots his spiralling course into the 'dark spaces I had seen as a private map inviting me to undertake strange quests' (213).

Exploration, particularly as it was experienced in Australia, is a perfectly apt source of metaphor for the quester's journey into his own psyche. Both entail journeys undertaken in the hope of finding some revelatory discovery in the inner reaches of the land/mind, only to encounter bland and indifferent terrain hinting at meanings that are reluctantly, or never, surrendered. The explorer/quester perseveres despite the mounting personal hardship, to the point where the hope of discovery may linger, but it is supplanted by the fact of the journey as the foremost achievement. Like the

explorer, the quester writes his own journey, always poised at the moment of articulating two worlds, the one of disappointment which he leaves behind and the one of promise he travels towards. As Nicholas Birns concludes, 'Both in landscape and in love, Murnane celebrates the indefinite beauty of unconsummated desire'¹²⁹.

It is important, however, that the images of landscapes and maps are not read as simply a deft means of suggesting the terrain of the author's mind which his fiction relentlessly explores. By being cast in terms of the elusiveness and impenetrability of certain landscapes, those images serve not only to suggest that the process of exploration of the 'inner self' is difficult, but to indicate that the quester's mind will be at ease only when it is comfortable with the physical landscapes which form its boundaries of perception. In order to feel truly at home in his environment, the quester must come to an understanding of both his mindscape and the physical landscapes with which it interacts.

Murnane is always aware, and the reader is always aware when reading Murnane, that 'Australia' is the field of exploration in which this journey through his mind is set. Murnane's Australia seemingly represents an idea on which he wishes to impose no limitations, and he represents Australia as being sufficiently vast to accept all the journeys he wishes to undertake and to absorb all the meaning he wishes to explore. He has written of 'the unthinkable: our finding at last that Australia was not wide enough to contain our idea of it' (*Landscape With Landscape*, 95).

By engaging in this dreaming Murnane's fiction reminds the reader that Australia can be represented as an idea created by those who 'explore'. In particular, he imagines that the continent might yet be the source of some ideal utopian landscape. This utopia, however, is no longer imagined as the site for the expansion of an empire, but rather as the opportunity to fulfil a far more personal need to discover a landscape where the quester can finally be at ease.

Like Astley's characters, the quester tackles the veils surrounding the continental centre, and like them, he fails to reach the landscape he is seeking. But he remains undaunted. The quester is driven by his obsessive need for discovery, and he continues to tear at the veils even as they seem to draw him further away from what he desires. As with the explorers of inland Australia, the quester seems likely to remain separated from the landscape of his dreams, but he can at least join with Ernest Giles in declaring his explorations a 'splendid failure'.

CHAPTER 5

RODNEY HALL: EXPLORING THE LAND IN THE MIND

The land itself is a land in the mind. We make up the idea of it as we go. The explorers are our poets.

Rodney Hall, *Kisses of the Enemy* (334)

In 1988 Rodney Hall published *Journey Through Australia*, a travel guide prepared for overseas visitors. In the manner of such books, Hall gives the reader a brief 'tour' of the major cities and a selection of rural and outback centres, and of a number of the country's major geographical features. The underlying subject of the book, however, is something more fundamental: the land. As Hall argues, 'Nowhere else on earth is the land more essential in determining the character of the community, both black and white'.¹³⁰

However, given the likely audience for this book, Hall is surprisingly disinterested in the natural scenic wonders and beauties of the land. His interest rests in evoking the spiritual qualities of a land and landscape which are 'not immediately spectacular to the eye' (33). There is an almost apologetic air in the manner in which he suggests on several occasions that an appreciation of the scale, intricacy and beauty of the land is only obtained from the window of a jet, where detail is swallowed and lost within a glimpse of the whole:

you fly out across the most extraordinary, map-like landscape, a grand expanse of space, across the muted colours and wrinkled landform of the mysterious outback. (21)

Hall argues that the spiritual qualities of the Australian land and landscape are not easily found or appreciated, but they are the prize for those who have the willingness and patience to encounter the land on its own terms.

To absorb the feel of the place, you need to be alone (even if you travel with other people, you must assert your privacy once you arrive), receptive and willing to wait, to accept, and to wait some more. The rewards are beyond analysis. (33)

For Hall, the rewards are those associated with 'the real beauty of the country . . . the unique sensation of total aloneness, and the mystery of feeling overpowered by the very featurelessness of the land and its indifference to your being there' (105). It is, he writes, 'a place rich in ghosts' (33).

Hall carries the same interest in the land and its uncompromising physical challenges and spiritual qualities into his fiction. In particular he has written of the challenges confronting non-Aboriginal Australians as they come to terms with this unique environment, and as they fashion it into either a semblance of the home they have known elsewhere, or into a version of a 'home' which derives its essential characteristics from the new land.¹³¹ Hall's fiction consistently acknowledges the difficulties involved in the task of shaping a suitable home in this environment, and it is shown to be an ongoing process as successive generations learn to make their own explorations of what he has dubbed 'a land in the mind'.

Hall concluded *Journey Through Australia* with an evocation of explorers and the role they have played in shaping conceptions of Australia. In doing so he implies that he too is an explorer, continuing

the process by which the land has been discovered, charted and understood.

Cook's maps of the coast charted nothing but those fragments which he was able to record in some detail . . . His maps were admirably accurate. But they were fragmentary also; and this was what made them so tantalising. They invited other explorers to seek further, to fill in the gaps and come to know more of what was, to the Europeans of the time, the last great unknown land.

I too, in my own way, have presented an incomplete Australia. In my travels I have seen a lot, but I know it is only a fraction of the riches offered by this wonderful country. (183)

As an 'explorer' himself, aware of the role other explorers played in shaping and creating a new home for European Australians, it is not unexpected that Hall should utilise exploratory tropes in his fiction. As he acknowledged in *Journey Through Australia*, it was the explorers of the inland who 'began furnishing the Australian imagination with a heroic identity' (22). It is a process which Hall furthers by his own exploration of the country's origins and proto-myths, in which non-Aboriginal Australians find themselves discovering the land as a spiritual as well as a physical space.

In his later novels in particular, Hall has engaged in a re-examination of Australian history through an interrogation of alternative experiences of the process of discovery and settlement. There were, he reminds us, a variety of responses to the strange and alien landscapes of Australia, and his fiction provides a voice for modes of 'discovery' which would not otherwise find expression in the explorers' journals or imperial histories. In this way Hall's fiction gives life to non-Aboriginal myths about the ongoing and developing relationship between the land and its inhabitants, and the process by which the Australian imagination has both shaped, and been shaped by, its encounter with the land. By doing so, he continues

the exploration of his homeland and the task of completing the tantalisingly unfinished maps of its spiritual terrain.

'A PROPER LEICHHARDT': *KISSES OF THE ENEMY*

Hall commenced the examination of the theme of the new land as 'home' in his second novel, *A Place Among People*,¹³² in which he examined the difficulty experienced by a number of inhabitants in finding a place for themselves in the small Queensland coastal town of Battery Spit. By moving the original Aboriginal inhabitants off their land and disregarding its 'spirit', the new white inhabitants are seen to empty the landscape of its meaning, whilst failing to fill the void with any meaningful signs of their own.

This was landscape sucked dry of spirit. It really had become whiteman's land: they'd created a home, passive soil, meaningless features (one hill = a change of gears; one slope of scrub = a convenient dump) . . . (65)

The Aboriginal woman Daisy believes that it has become a 'landscape sucked dry of spirit', but she retains a belief that this land might yet again become a true home.

This could be a home; if people had lived here long enough, continuously enough to love it and bring it alive. She knew it wanted life. (65)

In his next novel, *Just Relations*,¹³³ Hall continued to explore the processes by which non-Aboriginal Australians were to make the country into a new home and find a means of marrying their own form of life to the land. The setting on this occasion is the remote mining town of Whitey's Fall, a dying gold town in the tradition of Astley's Allbut.

Whitey's Fall sits on the side of a 'mountain' of ore tailings. It is a mountain of which 'the Aborigines of the region, the Koories, had no knowledge' (20). The mountain represents a new form of 'dreaming' in this country. It is the creation of the miners and their families, a landscape which they have not only built physically, but which they have brought into being as a result of their own character, language and knowledge.

Whitey's Fall perches halfway up a mountainside, the mountain the people created. Year by year they accumulated the knowledge, the experience. They have the words so they know how to live with it. By their toughness they survived to heap up its bluffs, by scepticism they etched its creekbeds. They've lived and spoken every part of this mountain, they've dreamed it and cursed it, looked to it for salvation and penance. Its outcrops of granite were the very ones the people named, quarried and picnicked on before you could really say there was a mountain in this place at all. (19)

It is also a landscape that is being emptied. The mountain already carries the scars of previous settlement and failed industry, and now the remnant town of Whitey's Fall is under threat as the original settlers begin to die out. Their grandchildren cannot understand the spirit of the town or its mountain, and outsiders now look at the town as a potential tourist site. As one of the town's older residents is aware, this is not an easy land to settle or make a home.

Australia is a continent on which you cannot build anything acceptable both to the land and to permanent habitation . . . it isn't a country for buildings, the natives never had any, and if we'd been more sensitive to where we were neither would we . . . (91)

In his following novel, *Kisses of the Enemy* (1987)¹³⁴ Hall turned to political satire. The novel opens in 1992, as Australia is in the

throes of an election campaign to decide the first President of the new Australian republic. The plot follows the election of President Bernard Buchanan, and his years of firstly growing and then waning power. Buchanan's fortunes fluctuate as he becomes increasingly subjected to the whims of his backer, and the country's real power, the Washington-controlled multinational, Interim Freeholdings Incorporated of Delaware (IFID).

Early in the novel, as a newly chosen presidential candidate, Buchanan sets out to drive alone into the centre of the continent in order to visit the United States satellite and defence installation at inland Paringa. Buchanan's drive in air-conditioned luxury takes him 'across waste land as vast as some entire countries' (31), and into the continental centre he has never seen before. He is fated, however, not to reach his destination. His petrol supply has been tampered with, and his act of discovery is thwarted when his car's engine seizes. He is abandoned in 'the very core of desolation, the heart of nothing' (31). For the first time in his life the aspiring politician who has 'never ventured beyond Canberra, plus that strip of closely settled and highly saleable land from Newcastle in the north down to Wollongong in the south' (176), comes face-to-face with a different landscape; one which might yet serve to warn him of the folly of subjugating such a place to transient and essentially foreign political interests. Buchanan finds himself stranded in the bottom of the long expired inland sea.

Long before: the invading sea had rushed in and tumbled rocks, cracking them to even sizes, grinding them together and washing them smooth . . . Ten million years (still palpable) sealed petrified bones of the sperm whale's progenitors buried far inland along the courses of extinct rivers. The desolate bed of the sea's labours dried and set to a stony plain . . . The stones did not move once the sea had gone. Wind could never budge them. There was nothing else to try. (31–32)

Despite the virtually dictatorial powers that Buchanan will soon assume and the role he will play in reshaping the country's political landscape, its ancient and indifferent physical landscape will remain untouchable. Had he been sufficiently sensitive, the novel suggests his experience in the stony sea bed might have been his one chance to re-appraise his personal ambitions and dedicate himself to using his power in a way which recognised the unassailable forces present in the land.

Buchanan is joined in the desert by Peter Taverner, whose car has also been sabotaged. They pass several days together as they await rescue, but Taverner is to have quite a different experience of this time spent on the dry desert sea bed. He finds a challenge in the 'solitude few dare cross', and 'Alone and without support, he felt stimulated' (43). For Taverner the mystical power of the desert offers him the chance for discoveries of his own, in an environment where others, including Buchanan, have all too obviously failed because they could not embrace the essential nature of the land. In describing Taverner's experience, Hall again uses the image of the dry inland seabed.

Stories survive of British explorers heading out across this wilderness ten million years too late to discover the inland sea of their hopes, horse hooves knocking the gibbers together, eyes glinting silver with the deadly glare; and eventually bones scattered as pathetic reminders that such deserts offer no here and no there. Peter Taverner found it to be all one. Never before had a religious feeling come to him. (43)

The image of the lost inland sea serves as both a reminder of the age and permanence of the land, and to symbolise the separation of non-Aboriginal Australians from the land as evidenced by the failure of inland explorers to realise their dreams.

Buchanan and Taverner are eventually rescued, and although they

go their separate ways, their respective experiences in the desert are instrumental in determining their futures. Their paths eventually cross again when Peter Taverner re-emerges as the Wild Dog, the most potent opponent of Buchanan's presidency.

In the meantime Buchanan makes an attempt to glamorise his ordeal in the wilderness, announcing that the 'journey was a quest' (56), but he is teased by his wife Dorina who declares him 'A proper Leichhardt' (55). Dorina's words come back to haunt Buchanan during his years as President. He eventually realises that his ordeal in the inland seabed was a missed opportunity to explore the meaning of the land he now rules, and by doing so purge himself of the corrupting and alien influence of IFID.

In the delirium of one hot day, Buchanan looked from his study window onto a desert of sparkling stones. Motes of light jumped off the unending floor of a sea lost for ten million years. He heard Dorina mock him: you were a proper Leichhardt, I gather. He swung on his swivelchair back to the familiar refuge of the study. (271)

Hall makes further use of exploratory tropes in *Kisses of the Enemy* as part of a device he develops to trace the shift of power as Australia moves from being a colonial outpost of the British Empire to a seemingly independent nation, but one which in reality remains equally subservient to the imperial interests of another foreign power. Hall achieves this by introducing some elements of colonial Australia, particularly through the figure of nineteenth-century Governor (and therefore Buchanan's predecessor in being an Australian governor presiding under the auspices of a foreign government) Sir George Gipps. We learn of Sir George and his gubernatorial manner through a lengthy letter his secretary writes to his estranged father in England; a letter in which the secretary renounces his allegiance to the old world and commits himself to the opportunities for a new life

provided by the colony. Sir George also lingers as a ghostly presence in the life of President Buchanan, as indeed an earlier version of Buchanan (as a rapacious opportunist) has made life difficult for Sir George in the nineteenth century. Buchanan and the ghost of Sir George now conduct 'conversations' in which they debate issues of independence in government.

The secretary's letter portrays Sir George as a difficult man, chosen for the job because of his loyalty to British interests. Despite his autocratic manner, however, Sir George is redeemed in the eyes of his secretary by his opposition to the 'squalid self-interest' which flourishes in the colony, and particularly his independence of action when dealing with Aboriginal affairs. The letter also includes a statement of the secretary's intent to remain in the colony, a decision based on the results of the inland explorations that are transforming the settlers' understanding of their new land.

I am part of a society still in the making . . . I should rather set out with Mr Sturt or Mr Leichhardt across the desert, if the reports of a desert are true, than sail again for the home I have been denied . . .

The land itself is a land of the mind. We make up the idea of it as we go. The explorers are our poets. The Governor needs an inland sea and vast grazing areas . . . so he encourages men to travel out in search of these things. (333–334)

Although the Governor supports the exploratory parties in the hope of finding grazing country, the secretary is aware that there is also a search of another type that is being undertaken. As explorers return with their descriptions of deserts and 'landscapes of stone over which the killing heat ticks', the colonial settlers 'adjust the place in our mind accordingly' (334). As 'a land of the mind', the process of discovery goes beyond assessing the surface nature of the

land and its potential to produce economic rewards, and touches upon its capacity to incite new ways of seeing and being. The secretary realises that these explorations are proving that Australia is, '*a paradox of impossibilities, which will never conform to your England nor your England's narrow rules of how a land must be*' (334).

The secretary's letter conjures up an image of Australia as the setting for a new and exciting future, far removed from the England which is 'infected with the lassitude of a rigid Empire' and in which 'ideas have all been used up' (335). Again this is something which he has learnt from the explorers, who are portrayed in his letter as the embodiment of the people's desire to embrace the metaphysical challenges offered by the interior. Ludwig Leichhardt's return from Port Essington is seen by the secretary as being that of a prophet returning from an ordeal in the desert. Leichhardt's return speaks not of the land as a failed site for agricultural production, but rather as a fitting place for renewal and redemption of the European mind.

The day Ludwig Leichhardt returned from the far north . . . the whole town went wild with the holiday. It was not the news he brought which excited people so much as his survival. You see how tired we are of your Empire? It is the individual man and the individual in ourselves we care about . . . when his ship berthed it brought the breath of survival. We went to the quay to look at Leichhardt because he had become ourselves. Vast wastelands and vast hungers were in that man, he breathed spaces in our midst. When he thanked the Governor . . . he thanked him in syllables of sun-drenched ranges and the waving crown of a forest his mind alone had stretched wide enough to imagine . . . This curious man-woman . . . is among us now, not as our most famous citizen but as our saviour, the stammering grinning proof that here in Australia one may defy death. (335)

The explorer has been changed by his experience into something suggesting the true nature of the continent, and the secretary is confident that the fact of his survival will incite a similar process in others. He is aware, however, that the deeds of Leichhardt and other explorers may not of themselves change the political imperatives of this new world. He knows all too well that the entrenched interests of the empire will continue 'spawning Macarthurs of greed and Buchanans of emptiness' (440) who see the land as simply a source of profit, but he at least has been moved to commit himself to realising the opportunities presented by living in a radically different place.

Hall uses the pairing of Gipps and Buchanan to highlight the failure of Buchanan's Presidency. The late twentieth-century Australia of *Kisses of the Enemy* may be a republic in name, but it remains as subservient as it was in the nineteenth century, and the colonial optimism represented in the secretary's letter has been replaced by a climate of fear and intimidation. The continental interior is no longer the wellspring of dreams about a new way of life, but rather a place dedicated to realising the military ambitions of a foreign government, and where the remnant Aboriginal population, corralled near Alice Springs, has become a new convict class. And explorers, who should be the 'poets' engaged in creating the land in the mind as a suitable home, are no longer represented by the boldness of Sturt and Leichhardt, but by the pitifulness of Buchanan's one attempt to penetrate the interior. The reader eventually realises the full extent of the contempt behind Dorina's sarcastic dismissal of her husband as a 'proper Leichhardt'.

'THE INFINITE STRANGE PLACE': *THE SECOND BRIDEGROOM*

Hall subsequently embarked on what became a quartet of novels, although they were not published in the same sequence as the chronology of the action they recount. *Captivity Captive* (1988),

The Second Bridegroom (1991), *The Grisly Wife* (1993), and *The Day We Had Hitler Home* (2000) are loosely connected in terms of plot and characters, but they are united by a shared sense of place and recurrent themes.¹³⁵ In particular, all four novels deal with the process by which Australia has been occupied and settled, and the extent to which the island-continent has proven to be resistant to an easy assimilation of imported modes of seeing and thinking. All four, and in particular *The Second Bridegroom*, make use of the explorer figure and tropes derived from exploration.

In terms of the chronology of their action *The Second Bridegroom* is the first of the novels. The novel opens in the mid-1830s, as a boatload of convicts arrive at the scene of a proposed new coastal settlement. The unnamed central character, who is narrating the action in the form of a journal prepared for an as yet unknown reader, has only recently been transported for forgery, and after a brief stay in Sydney has been selected to join this new venture. As the narrator reveals more of himself through the course of his journal, we learn that he is a young man with some education who has previously worked as a printer, and he is a native of what he describes as the oldest English colony, The Isle of Man.

The form of the novel itself is mimetic, and indeed parodic, of an explorer's journal. Hall has carefully structured the text so that the allusions to journals of exploration are unmistakable, and serve to underline the construction of the narrator's 'journal' as a record of a new form of Australian exploration. The action recounted in the narrator's journal incorporates a series of inversions of the conventions expected of the genre of the exploration journal, to the point where the narrator's concluding boast, referring to his time as an escapee in the Australian bush, is that 'I can say that in my life up there I discovered nothing' (194). Hall's narrator is an explorer who is not concerned with discovery of a sort which values significant landmarks or the charting and acquisition of land for economic benefit, but rather he is acutely interested in

learning something of the spiritual essence of the land.

From the outset the narrator stresses the opportunity for new beginnings and discoveries which are offered by the settlement. In phrases recalling those used by explorers to describe their encounters with unexplored regions, he recounts how the 'wild and untouched look of our new home sent a thrill through me' (5); and of how the participants in this venture 'knew we had arrived at a new beginning' (8). Enthralled by this newness, the narrator casts himself as one of the select band of explorers and adventurers.

Since we were infants at our parents' knee hadn't we heard tales of fabulous lands being discovered and explored? Did we not follow the adventures of Sinbad as if we ourselves were the ones to be caught and carried by the giant roc to its nest? (17)

However, the land awaiting exploration is different from those that have previously been explored. In passages that echo the mixture of hope and apprehension commonly found in explorers' writings, the narrator ponders on this land being a final opportunity, the only great landmass that will be explored in the knowledge that there is no other awaiting discovery. It is a *tabula rasa* which offers hope for a new future because it has a past 'never tainted by our sort of knowing' (18).

With the benefit, however, of the hindsight afforded to the explorer as he constructs his journal, the narrator appreciates that the land was far from a blank slate. He now understands that even in its apparently untouched state the land was replete with signs which resisted interpretation because they required a different sort of knowing, one divorced from the aspirations and expectations of those who came to occupy the land in the service of the empire with its insatiable need for trade and profit. Whereas the settlers look gleefully to the future, the narrator understands that the land demands that they deal with its past.

Here in New South Wales one thing we do know is that this is the last foreign shore, the last unknown land, the only adventure to yield none of our desires: no gold, no cities. Even the trees are strange to us and the animals are those useless freaks the whole world hears of, egg-laying flying reptiles, fantasies of Nature. Instead of taking us forward, what we see takes us back to the beginnings of time. (17)

The narrator's tone, therefore, is not one of unbridled optimism. He is aware that new beginnings carry risks, and that the beckoning future would necessarily entail suffering, hardship and probably worse. He comes, however, as part of an imperial power which is prepared to take whatever action is necessary in order to indulge its appetite for expansion.

We lived for the future. Any piracy, any theft, any evil would be made all right by the future: isn't this the truth of our colonial philosophy? . . . From the Governor down to his scullery maid we became Australians, a race with one foot in the air, caught stepping forward.

The bigger this great island is supposed to be, the more it appeals to our gambling vice. (17)

Despite this desire to be 'stepping forward', the narrator realises that the new arrivals are tied to their past, in that they bring with them the taint of their particular brand of corrupted 'knowing', which will transform the place forever. Rather than being free to create a new life in this Edenic setting, most of the arrivals come in bondage with the intention that they should be forced to recreate the social, economic and political circumstances of the old world. They bring with them into the apparently unsullied wilderness the knowledge of 'human livestock' (20) kept in chains; of men bought and sold into servitude; and of a colonialism which

condones any cruelty in order to expand its reach.

The narrator accepts that he too has played a part in the process by which this new place has been corrupted. In the night before the landing he believes he has killed another convict, Gabriel Dean. He has 'discovered that darkness was in me as well as around me' (13). Certain that he will be executed for his crime, he escapes into the forest as the landing party comes ashore at the site of the new settlement. In doing so he carries into the wilderness his own 'sickness of the conscience' (10).

From the moment of his escape the narrator evolves into a new kind of Australian explorer. He is the first non-Aboriginal person to walk through this place, and he does so with the instincts and the curiosity of those who explored the continent under more conventional arrangements. The particular circumstances under which he encounters the land, however, and his history as a native of an island familiar with colonial occupation, create a very different type of exploration.

It is clear from the start that the narrator is ill-equipped to be an explorer of the usual type. He announces when introducing himself that 'I am near-sighted' and 'a man who sees no details at a distance' (3). This near-sightedness is clearly at odds with what Simon Ryan has described as 'exploration methodology's heavy reliance on sight'¹³⁶. The acquisitive gaze of the explorer was the principal means by which space was brought within the realm of the discovered, and the processes of mensuration and appropriation commenced.

The narrator's myopia serves as a metaphor for the inability of the explorer of a new land to truly see and therefore understand what it is he has discovered. When the narrator first encounters the forest he is mystified by a view which offers 'no foreground or perspective, just a simple up and down without any way through' (29). His inability to properly investigate what he does see, and his failure to integrate it with his preconceived notion of landscape, inhibits his capacity to travel, and therefore to 'discover' objects,

places and landmarks. He is puzzled as he moves through vistas that seem to offer no change or sense of progress, and he is forced to wonder if he has really 'travelled' at all.

You know how it is in a forest: as you run, the nearby trees sweep past you, a bow wave arcing around on either side, while beyond them an outer band of trees moves your way . . .
However desperate you attempt to escape, all you can ever do is speed up this confusion and drive the counter-circling maze faster . . .

Both the near band of wheeling forest and the outer band counter-wheeling slowed down. When I stopped they stopped. I was a beaten man. They were trees in a land never used. (30)

The narrator's failure to see the new land is not, however, only a result of his near-sightedness. When he first encounters the group of Aboriginal men with whom he will keep company, he literally does not see them. This is not solely because his eyesight fails him, but also because to this newcomer threatening figures such as these silent hunters 'had not yet been imagined' (28). Explorers notoriously judged their discoveries by the inadequate yardsticks of that which they knew to exist elsewhere, and therefore imagined might exist in the new place. As a result, they were often incapable of recognizing features or worth in new land because they could not anticipate what it was they might discover. Hall's narrator must learn to 'see' again with an imagination tempered by his new experiences before he will begin to understand the place he now inhabits.

The difficulties inherent in seeing a new place on its own terms rather than through the distorted lens of preconceived ideas and values is further highlighted when the Men (as the narrator calls his Aboriginal companions) show him some of their significant sites in the landscape. Although the narrator realises these places have some

religious or totemic significance he is incapable of understanding their particular importance because he does not see the sites as the Men do.

During our journey out they pointed to every feature of the landscape as if I might recognize it. They behaved like family welcoming a cousin who has been many years away from home, reminding him of childhood games, making a tour of certain caves and standing rocks. They took me to admire particular trees with nothing remarkable about them, gnarled growths and even strange shadows on the soil . . . I was only able to gratify them by gazing long at what they showed me and seeming to recall it. (48)

In this at least the narrator has much in common with other Australian explorers, who were frequently incapable of reading the signs created by Aboriginal habitation, or of discerning the depth of Aboriginal spiritual attachment to the natural world. This was hardly surprising given the differences between their respective cultures. Hall, however, is pointing even more directly to the problem of learning to see the 'home' that already exists for the prior occupants of a newly settled land. Seeing, or indeed being shown, is not sufficient to bring a place or an object within the realm of the known for the explorer. The narrator, like others who encounter a new space, does not possess the codes of understanding that would enable him to comprehend the significance of what he sees.

Hall further subverts the explorer's claim that space can be acquired simply by possessing it visually, by employing various tropes derived from the development of new forms of ocular aids and means of obtaining visual records. *The Second Bridegroom*, *The Grisly Wife*, *Captivity Captive* and *The Day We Had Hitler Home* feature a succession of magnifying lens, spectacles, daguerreotypes, engraving machines and fixed lens and moving image cameras, which help

new inhabitants to visually acquire and occupy their surroundings. But while these various aids to seeing and recording the land produce an improved view or a more fixed image of carefully selected landscapes, they do little to add to the explorer's or settler's capacity to comprehend the true nature of the land.

As Simon Ryan has pointed out, the landscape and ethnographic engravings which explorers commissioned to accompany their published journals were a means whereby the discovered space was rendered in a manner that brought it within the realm of approved systems of seeing. Constructing the landscape through carefully composed engravings provided an opportunity for explorers to de-contextualise selected fragments of the land, and to make them accessible to an audience familiar with various European aesthetic codes, particularly the picturesque. Ryan concludes, however, that 'the picturesque deconstructs the journals' claims to the authority of originality and immediacy, for no longer is the vision fresh and unaffected, but is culturally mediated'.¹³⁷ By using telescopes to improve their field of vision; modern lithographic and printing technology to mass produce images which supported the empire expanding text; and rendering landscape in accordance with established European artistic and aesthetic traditions, explorers were furthering the process by which the land was appropriated by making it visually accessible and desirable and therefore ready for ownership. As Paul Carter has noted, 'being able to take away images of the country travelled . . . was not only a means of recording space but of manipulating it. Scaling down horizons to the width of a page, it enabled one to model reality, to plan invasions'.¹³⁸

As a result, however, of the circumstances that bring the narrator into contact with the land and its previous inhabitants, he sees and records his new world differently from other explorers. He is not the detached and objective observer of scientific, zoological and anthropological phenomena, attempting to describe, survey and map the land in order to satisfy the interest of learned societies; neither is

he the expander of empire seeking to leave the requisite marks of ownership on the landscape; nor is he the incipient landowner assessing the land and its products in order to measure its material worth; and nor is he the fledgling hero, shaping a journey which will endear him forever to an expectant public. Rather, he is thrown into his situation as somebody attempting to escape from civilization rather than expand it, and he therefore engages in a new style of exploration. Instead of constructing what he sees in a manner that imposes alien conceptions of order, knowledge and beauty, he attempts to truly explore the land by seeking to understand the unseen meanings that lie behind the initially puzzling surfaces.

In doing so he forgoes one of the explorer's primary tasks; that of interpreting and describing discoveries within the framework of imported knowledge and value structures. It was by rendering discovered places in terms which utilised prevailing standards of scientific measurement and aesthetic values that explorers ensured their texts were accessible to governments and the reading public. The narrator of *The Second Bridegroom*, however, realises that this environment will only be survived, and perhaps understood, if he surrenders himself to it rather than attempts to integrate it with, or subordinate it to, any body of knowledge he already possesses. He therefore abandons his learning and declares that 'I had arrived at a place where all my knowledge was useless' (37). In doing so he forsakes the explorer's claim to see the places through which he travels from the privileged position of an educated, civilizing – and by implication, superior – agent. Whereas the nineteenth-century scientific mind sought to assimilate new discoveries by classifying them within hierarchies of scientific knowledge derived from the known world, the narrator discards these imported constructs and realises that 'I must accept what the world sent me' (25).

I promised not to try reading the messages I heard and smelled
and touched, tasted and saw. I would respect them as having no

use. None of them would be the same tomorrow. Nor were they the same yesterday. Each moment is the present: it sounds and smells and tastes only of itself. (21–22)

Not only does the narrator empty himself of his prior knowledge, but he also peels away the explorers' pretence of 'knowing' the discovered land through the various forms of scientific and aesthetic appropriation of space upon which their craft was based. He specifically rejects the use of exploratory practices that were designed to make discoveries known, such as collecting specimens.

Such curious creatures we are, to be so fascinated by discovery, to have such a passion for things we can collect as items of strange behaviour. (40)

As the narrator travels across the land with his Aboriginal companions he conspicuously fails to record it in any way, and the journal he produces is devoid of detail of a geographic or cartographic nature. It even disputes that 'discovery' of the type required in the cause of imperial expansion is even possible.

I dare say you will be curious to hear what I did out there during that tribal journey, having so much time on my hands. The answer is nothing . . . The knack was admitting that there can be no such thing as the discovery of a land. Does this surprise you? Granted we hear tales pitched at having us believe that there is nothing in the world so interesting, from big discoveries by Marco Polo and James Cook and company, down to little places called Somebody's Folly. (191)

In the initial excitement of escape and entry into the forest the narrator had been seduced by the temptation to discover and to lay claim to his role as an explorer, recalling his thrill at the realisation

that 'Perhaps no human foot has ever trodden here' (26). By the close of his own 'explorations' and the creation of his journal, however, he realises that there can be no first footprints left upon the land, and that the notion of 'discovery' of a place has no meaning except as another fleeting moment in the ongoing process by which the land reveals itself.

As for James Cook being rowed ashore by sailors with hats and striped vests. You can see them in your mind's eye with their trews rolled up . . . You can watch the great man leap out – success makes him young and springy – wading ashore to print the sand with the first boot mark ever made here. Well, aren't a hundred other eyes also watching? Don't the ocean wash away the imprint?

Nevertheless the first boot, being the first boot, you argue, must have been important.

Did it not take aeons for this place to be created, I reply, is it not old as the stars? So what about a boot mark in the sand now? (193)

The narrator proceeds to denounce two of the explorer's most potent weapons of appropriation, the name and the map, both of which are a means of laying claim to land which is 'unknown'.

But what do discoverers do? They put names to landmarks unknown to them and not named by anybody they ever heard of. But do we imagine the Cape of Good Hope came into being just to be called that name? We might as well talk about the discoverers of ignorance.

All that happens is that words and numbers are written down. The chart is a big blank except for a squiggle of coast here and a river mouth there: a scatter of names on a clean expanse of ignorance. (191–192)

The narrator concludes that explorers, by haphazardly assigning names that have no foundation in the places to which they are applied, and in creating maps which sketch in only narrow paths at the edge of, or across, a vast continental space, were not so much asserting their dominion over a space as revealing their ignorance of it. The narrator even suggests that another of the explorer's tools of appropriation, the very language that gives rise to those names, is an irredeemably inadequate means of expressing any understanding of a foreign space.

Botany Bay, for example, was discovered by Cook because no other Englishman landed there before him in time to call it Dog Inlet. True enough. But what did he do when he chose the name? The place knew nothing of Botany Bay. He put a dabbler's limitation on it; and admitted that he had such a poor huddle of categories in his mind that this was the best he could do for the infinite strange place he chanced upon. Bay, cove, inlet, sound, gulf, kyle, harbour – what else is there? (192)

Tropes derived from language, and in particular the construction of names, are used in *The Second Bridegroom* to suggest both the narrator's sense of isolation, and the difficulty any settler faces in creating a home in a new land. The narrator is distinguished from other convicts by his education, and in particular his language skills. He declares early in his journal that 'I am a word man' (18), and he believes that this gives him some kinship with his Master, Mr Atholl. But whereas the power over language is usually seen as a liberating force, the narrator believes that as an occupant of a new land his imported language signifies ongoing imprisonment in an alien system of knowledge.

I have come to believe that Mr Atholl knew he and I were shackled to the same bond of words, words to be broken out of

before the new kingdom could find its airy regions among the clutter of old misfitting uses. That's the best way I can put it. (19)

Images of incarceration and enclosure are central to the novel, being used as a means of suggesting the narrator's continued bondage to the inherited culture he carries with him, just as the manacle which remains on his wrist signifies his ongoing subjection to the laws of his past world. The link in the novel between language and confinement is strong. The narrator's father has been imprisoned and executed by the English. He is portrayed in his son's journal as the victim of a foreign law which is encoded in a language which he cannot comprehend, and in turn his crime is inextricably linked to his Manx identity and language.

My father spoke no word of English in my hearing ever. Manx was his language and he stood by his own folk. He was neither for the Goidelic people nor the Brythonic people: the fact that Irishmen and Scotsmen could make little sense of our tongue being proof enough. As for the English, how should poor father even know the law when he had no word of their rules in his head? (59)

The narrator is taught English by his mother, but it is this very accomplishment which will eventually render him a convict after he is found guilty of forgery. It is, he claims, a crime which resulted from his 'love of English' (25–26); but it is his identity as a foreigner, revealed through his native language, which leads to his arrest and the charge which is brought against him:

It amounted to this. A professor came to question me on my knowledge of the Manx language, which I was proud to prove I spoke. And then I was charged, as a foreigner in England, with theft of a national treasure. (101)

The narrator is therefore sensitive to issues related to the role of language in identifying a people and the space they occupy. He knows language has been crucial to his Manx identity and is part of what gives his people their continuing sense of otherness.

So what would an Englishman choose to fear if that were the coast he had just landed on for the first time? These were the fears of foreigners. No doubt our folk were monsters too, of a sort, with a language which we kept to ourselves . . . (26)

Having been part of a territory which experienced invasion by the English, whose tyranny he sees as being represented by their language, he now finds himself part of an English colonising force and he carries with him those same 'alien words of English' (37) into yet another foreign environment.

This sensitivity to the inappropriateness of his language to this new land means that the narrator is reluctant to do what any good explorer should – provide names. He not only considers English irrelevant when applying names to places, but he also resists using it to name any of the variety of phenomena he encounters in his journey. When he finds he must provide an appellation to the Aboriginal men, he does so reluctantly, and fully aware that the words he uses will be an intrusion on a space which knows no English.

I even caught myself giving them a general name: Men. Well, the excuse was to hand, this was cleaner than clumsy dodges with roundabout words, which would lead to an even greater plague of English spreading in a world which English has no right to. (41)

Explorers, however, were expected not only to describe what they discovered but also to apply names, suitable or otherwise. New places and species were brought into being by naming them, a process that creates their identity, and provides a signifier whereby they are

differentiated from similar discoveries. The narrator, however, believes that applying names of English derivation will only serve to efface those elements which make each discovery unique, by denying them the name which is already theirs according to the language of their own land.

If my names for these marvels do not convince you, this is not to say that the marvels are not there – simply that English has nothing to know them by . . . And don't you see? If once we give things our own names we would have to begin destroying them. (69)

In his journal, rather than attempting to name his discoveries, the narrator relies upon using composites of existing words and descriptive comparisons to known flora and fauna to express the phenomena he encounters. Even in this attempt to describe rather than name, however, he is bound and limited by the imported language, which confines his comparisons to examples which fall within his own alien knowledge structures. Thus he writes of 'a smooth white caterpillar appearing powdered with ashes' (33), and 'little water badgers with duck bills and webbed feet' (69). The frustration of attempting to describe unfamiliar life forms and landscapes was known to most explorers, and the narrator's fumbling attempts to render his descriptions in terms of European exemplars is a commonplace of the explorers' journals. Although explorers were selected for the task in part based on their capacity to produce an articulate account of their experience, nearly all floundered at times in their attempt to find words to describe what they saw. Oxley's encounter with 'country that baffles all description' (*JTE*, 250); Giles's exasperation at a landscape so barren 'it is impossible to describe it' (*ATT*, II, 291), and Sturt finding a place so unusual that 'I find it impossible, indeed, to describe the scene' (*NE*, I, 222), are reactions of a sort which punctuate the explorers' jour-

nals. They also find a precise echo in *The Second Bridegroom* when the narrator exclaims, 'How difficult it all is to describe' (30).

Despite the importance of language to the narrator, in the time he spends with the Men he learns nothing of their language and they learn nothing of his. As a result he is again taken prisoner, this time because his inability to speak their language makes him a fetish object to the Aborigines.

The fact that we had no speech in common warranted my greatness, you see, and their need to serve me. If I had been able to make myself plain how could they fail to see me as a man like themselves . . .

The Men kept me as their King. (76)

The narrator realises that his inability to speak the native language not only isolates him from the Men, but also separates him from an understanding of their land. The native language is intrinsic to an environment that remains foreign to the narrator.

I realised that what I had taken for murmurous foliage was the speech of these creatures. Talk flew among them, alighting on one and a moment later on another, till it took up a rhythm. The pulse of the sea drifted into their mouths and out again as chanting. (27)

The narrator's failure to comprehend the language of his Aboriginal companions is a major barrier preventing him from coming to terms with the new place and its occupants. Frustrated and made lonely by his inability to communicate, he records that 'I was beyond words' (38).

The narrator's language induced isolation is further emphasised when he begins to lose his grasp of English. In one incident he attempts to call out to his old Master.

My mouth opened and I shouted.

No shout came; only a gasp of something stale.

I swallowed to get my voice back, the voice I had scarce used
in all this time . . . Disuse robbed me of power. (54)

He realises that having lost the power over English and not having learnt the Aboriginal language, he now belongs to neither group. In this he becomes an exemplar of the explorer and of the post-colonial condition, isolated from both his imported culture and his new world.

Hall works a further inversion of the explorer-as-author genre, in that the narrator's journal challenges the narratives of the imposition of order and the benefits of empire which were central to the explorers' journals. The explorers and settlers of inland Australia saw the forces of order represented by agriculture, science and commerce as a means of making the wilderness productive. As the vanguard of civilization, explorers saw it as part of their task to begin the process of imposing order upon what was constructed in their journals as an unordered wilderness. George Grey recorded just such a moment when he foresees a time when 'rude nature and the savage would no longer reign supreme'.

I pictured to myself the bleating sheep and the lowing herds, wandering over these fertile hills; and I chose the very spot on which my house should stand, surrounded with as fine an amphitheatre of verdant land as the eye of man has ever gazed on. The view was backed by the Victoria Range, while seaward you looked out through a romantic glen upon the great Indian Ocean. I knew within four or five years civilization would have followed my tracks . . . (*Two Expeditions of Discovery*, II, 29–30)

Hall's narrator is familiar with such notions of well-ordered romantic landscapes and agricultural plenty. Even as he has become

increasingly familiar with the new and apparently chaotic place he now inhabits, he has continued to recall nostalgically the highly organized landscapes of his former island home.

Let me show you my notion of perfect order. There it is, a tiny island . . .

To the north lies a fertile plain, to its west a clean-sweep stony ridge, to the east a wet vale where herds graze . . .

There has been time for everything. Order rules. Fields are ploughed in furrows straight as combs. Orchards are planted in rows . . . You see how perfect it is, and how complete. (134–135)

What the narrator encounters in this new land, however, is something entirely opposite, where the reforming and civilizing hand of European man is unknown. In a reaction which might have been extracted from an explorer's journal, the narrator describes a scene which disrupts all his preconceived notions of the scale, colour, distance and variety he expects to find in a landscape.

How could I be expected to imagine what I found here: an endless land with a maze of jungle ridges fanning in every bewildered direction as various and grim as a choppy sea, where each landmark is set among a thousand thousands like it, or the inland plains under vast skies parading clouds that can be seen a hundred miles away, a continent of yellow-grey grass littered with pebbles which, seen closer, are bigger than barrels, bigger than carts, bigger than houses . . . All this was indeed a strange world. (138)

Initially the narrator realises he has entered a realm where 'the rational world of my upbringing [did] battle against the allure of a thing without form' (14); but he soon learns to accept this 'hub of chaos' (36) and then embrace it as a new way of life. Indeed he quickly comes to realise that it is a form of order which simply

differs from the one which he has inherited. He admires his Aboriginal companions for their 'perfect chaos' (41), and he comes to see 'with joy how disordered they were' (68).

As his journal unfolds, the narrator becomes increasingly intrigued by the implications of the 'perfect chaos'. He realises that the colonists' notion of order is simply another alien construction by which they attempt to impose their stamp of ownership upon an environment which otherwise challenges their concept of the world and their place in it. Ultimately, however, the imposition of a foreign concept of order will prevent them developing an understanding of their new land.

I began to see what order is. Order is a way of trapping anything wild, tricking us into the game of thinking we understand. When you come down to it, the need for order is the mark of a coward. (41–42)

And although the narrator has been convicted of the crime of forgery by the English courts, it is forgery by the English which he in turn sees being perpetrated in the colony, as the settlers attempt to bring their own sense of order to what they see as an intrinsically disordered place.

Your vision widens to reach a hamlet perched on the shore, an outpost of stone and shingles like any little English port (forgery), its church a smaller copy of the very church you were baptized in (forgery), the citizens on the street respectable in full skirts and frock coats (forgery). But spare a moment to see past the fashions, the fences and straight roads, to see marooned folk lost and longing for the comfort of their bosky county home and hedgerows and Sunday rambles, cursing the Indians who fail to live up to Man Friday's example. Is this order? (102–03)

The reader eventually learns that the narrator's journal is addressed to Mrs Atholl, his master's wife. The narrator believes that he and Mrs Atholl are linked because they have both been held captive by her husband ('Had you known you were trapped in the prison of his needs?' (187)) and because he believes they have both committed murder; he of Gabriel Dean and she of her husband. She is a woman the narrator has hardly seen but with whom he has fallen in love, and the journal is written as a declaration of that love. The narrator believes that he can woo his reader by impressing upon her the uniqueness of the land by which he has been seduced. He believes the land offers them the chance of a new life freed from the bondage and enslavement to the empire's ideals of territorial expansion, commercial reward, and a new England in the Antipodes.

The narrator believes that Mrs Atholl has become a prisoner to the values represented by her husband and all those who try to recreate a pale imitation of the old world in the colony. The narrator has tasted a new sort of life and freedom in his explorations of the land, and he now wishes to free his 'lover' from her enslavement to the familiar but inappropriate symbols of comfort and appropriation which have been brought to the colony.

Your husband has had you in bondage to his cause of creating a counterfeit England by cutting down strange trees and digging out plants with no name. He has had you in bondage to the comfort of being able to call this thing a cabbage, this thing a peapod; of fencing animals you call a cow, a horse, and keeping them fenced in case they recognize freedom with less trouble than civilized man. (194)

What the narrator is doing in these passages is further challenging the explorer's right to impose any form of Eurocentric understanding of order (be it scientific or aesthetic) upon the spaces

they discovered. By contrast, the explorers of inland Australia invariably saw the forces of science, commerce and agriculture which were to follow in their footsteps as a means of introducing the order which was required to make the wilderness suitably productive. Thomas Mitchell wrote of his desire to:

spread the light of civilization over a portion of the globe yet unknown, though rich, perhaps, in the luxuriance of uncultivated nature, and where science might accomplish new and unthought-of discoveries; while intelligent man would find a region . . . waiting only for his enterprising spirit and improving hand to turn to account the native bounty of the soil. (*Three Expeditions*, I, 5)

Little did it occur to explorers such as Mitchell that the incursion of imported concepts of order and productivity into these spaces might destroy a pre-existing and productive order of a type they could not as yet recognise or understand.

The narrator, however, *is* learning to recognise the finely tuned balance that exists in the apparently chaotic wilderness, and he realises that the impact of foreign concepts of 'order' upon this apparently disordered environment will not necessarily be beneficial. He stops to wonder, as he watches an eagle gliding above, whether the impact of his presence alone might be enough to destroy this existing world.

Did I spoil his chaos? Was I a miracle in a world which could admit no miracles without losing its sense of being whole – or was I the invader who upsets an organized plan of food growth and food taking without understanding it? (80)

While the narrator is learning to accept and understand the ordered chaos of his new environment, the settlement from which he escaped is beginning to impose a more familiar form of 'order'

upon the land. Edwin Atholl, the Master, emerges as an opponent to the narrator. Although the competition between the two men will later take an unexpected turn, it is initially made apparent in their different attitudes to the new land. Whereas the narrator learns to embrace the chaos, Mr Atholl begins to impose a European sense of order and all that it signifies. The first mark he makes upon the landscape is to 'put up a fence because he feared his herds might cheat him of power by running away' (19).

Fences and roads serve throughout the novel as symbols of the colonists' desire to possess and regulate the land for their exclusive use. Whereas explorers used their journals to express their delight at the anticipated signs of civilization which would follow on their heels, the narrator is appalled when, upon returning from his journey of discovery with the Men, he encounters the fences and roads which have been constructed by the settlers:

Well, from the crest of the ridge the sight was blinding and so strange I could make no sense of it . . . The natural aspect of the place was wiped out. The soil gaped with lacerations. Alien to itself, the land lay wounded . . . (43)

The narrator sees that the fences and roads are physical incursions on the land that alter forever its shape and use, that it is 'something no longer complete' (45). They also serve to map the landscape in more fundamental ways, by separating those areas that have been civilized from those that remain unmarked by signs of ownership.

The fence marked a boundary across changed land. Grass inside the fence, though it might look like grass outside, was not at all the same: that grass was Property, as this was Nature. Trees had been cleared from the paddock. And the soil, yielding a lusher crop, was being fertilized by cattle. (86)

The narrator is also aware that enclosing property is an action taken not only to protect pastures and livestock, but also to ensure exclusive access for the 'owners'. Whereas his Aboriginal companions have 'refined the notion of brotherhood' (73), the building of fences undertaken by the settlers indicates they have very different values.

What is society at bottom? Must there be fences – some people inside and others outside? The closer a family grows, does this mean that anyone who is not kin will be all the more unwelcome and kept out? (73)

In thus representing the narrator's responses to the appearance of roads, fences, buildings, crops and farm animals, Hall is working another inversion of the conventions of the explorer's journal, a mainstay of which was the turning of the exploratory gaze upon the Aboriginals. As Paul Carter and Simon Ryan¹³⁹ have declared, the interactions with Aboriginals and the explorers' interpretations of them were heavily culturally mediated, with the Aboriginals being subjected to the imposition of various stereotypes. The explorers' imperative to travel across occupied country invariably disrupted any opportunity to observe behaviour which was not induced by, or contrived in response to, the presence of the observing explorer. The representation of these interactions in the explorers' journals was further complicated by the need to construct the journal according to the expectations of the genre. This called for the natives to be rendered sometimes as noble savages, but more frequently as one of the dangers that must be overcome on the way to some ultimate discovery or exploring success.

The ethnographic gaze in *The Second Bridegroom* is reversed. The narrator increasingly identifies with his Aboriginal companions, and begins to see the world, including those who trespass upon it, through their eyes. He realises that he now 'saw with forest eyes used to the gentle forest light' (43). It is with this new sight that the short-

sighted explorer gazes upon the settlers and assesses their impact upon the landscape.

Please do not imagine I have forgotten what civilization is. I saw the road clearly as a road. The buildings as buildings. But I also saw, with the sight of Men, the horror of it, the plunder, the final emptiness. (43–44)

Then we came to a fence. Imagine it. The fence baffled me as if I had never seen one before . . . The Men would certainly have no name for this thing so I gave it the name I had brought with me. Fence. (85)

Ultimately, however, the narrator is forced to concede that he can never really belong with the Aboriginals. The gulf indicated by the lack of a common language is only one indication of a deeper separation of cultures between him and his companions. The realisation of the extent of his isolation comes in an incident when a young Aboriginal girl strays across the path of the Men, and in doing so she breaches a law of the group. The narrator realises in that moment that all communities have their boundaries and limits, their own fences, only that some are more obvious than others.

She was caught facing us. In a manner of speaking she had fetched up against a sort of fence too – a fence no eye could see. She was one of the tribe, so already she knew what was to come. (88)

She is slain with spears, and the stunned white man rushes forward to cradle her as she dies. The narrator accepts this incident as ‘part of the chaos and true to it’ (105), but it also makes it obvious that he will always be a stranger to the ways of the Men.

To me she was innocent. But to her own people she was not.
Right until that moment I could be proud of having fitted
myself into their world. (104)

The narrator has had other insights into his mounting isolation. His journal recounts an occasion on which his journey with the Men brought him to a valley. After a long period in the darkness of the forest he is suddenly confronted with a new landscape which transports him into 'the life of pure light' (79). The description he gives of the scene is of a landscape of the picturesque sublime type so highly prized by explorers.

The land opened below as a stupendous gorge. I felt my soul fly
straight out of me and high above the forested hills so thick with
the screech of a thousand cockatoos into that valley of space . . .

Such a place this is, with the sides of the gorge like long
winding curtains of rock hung with ropes of white water here
and there. The cascades seem to fall too slow and to defy nature,
the far ones are heard like a long sigh in an organ pipe beyond a
soft thunder of those nearby . . . (78–79)

The notion of the sublime (and the picturesque) are, however, a socially constructed aesthetic response to space, and foreign to the Men who share the view of the scene. So while it induces in the narrator a series of emotional associations frequently attached to European romantic perceptions of such landscapes ('ecstasy' (sic.); a soaring of the spirit accompanied by an almost literal soaring of the body; and thoughts of suicide as a release into a sublime, vast silence), the Men remain unmoved by the scene. As the narrator releases his spirit to the landscape, he also realises that his response to it is a mark of his separation from his companions.

Out over the killing emptiness I soared. Gliding on fear, the pure strength of invisibility holding me up . . . Absolute confidence came to me. My guardians stood locked in their roots with the ground. I was alone. (79)

The narrator's journal is itself an attempt to overcome his isolation; addressed to the woman he loves as a plea that she join her life to his before he returns to the forest. As he sits and pens the journal in his storeroom prison, he waits for her to release him back to the wilderness and contemplates his return to the landscapes that now speak to him of freedom. The narrator's journal arises from and embraces the landscapes that surround them, and he invites her to join him in his plan to return there and further explore the chaos of which he is now a part.

These letters do not attempt to put our lives in order. They are part of the muddle . . .

How delicious the hope that you will find in my confusion a new country to claim as your own and possess. (176)

He wants to take her to the forest, and teach her what he has learnt in his explorations of the ways of a new land.

I heard a flock of birds fly away chattering, headed for the forest. The thought of it makes me anxious. I want my own freedom, please. The land calls. But I shall not expect you to feel the land as I feel it. There is plenty of time. (186)

He proposes that his wedding gift to her will be to 'open your eyes to the beauty of things without meaning or use' (193) which lie beyond the settlement in a place where 'You can predict nothing' and 'The newness invades you' (194).

The narrator, however, has been possessed by a fanciful delusion.

Mrs Atholl considers him no more than a dangerous escaped convict who has been 'driven to wildness' (208) by his time in the forest. As his confession unfolds he finally begins to suspect that she may in fact be his gaoler, and he again commits himself to escape into the freedom and isolation of the wilderness. In doing so he further breaks his connection to the old world, in that he realises that he is not about to fulfil his dreams of becoming the 'second bridegroom'. The narrator has learnt from the Celtic myths of the Isle of Man that his people of Kirk Braddon are condemned to wars until such time as the winter king is restored to his rightful position as the second bridegroom to the Goddess of Kirk Braddon. And despite the prolonged reign of the warring summer king, the narrator explains that, 'we of Kirk Braddon were still the winter king's folk' (68). As he waits in his gaol composing love letters to his own 'Goddess', he fancies that he can still hear the flute call of the winter king, and that he himself will yet prove to be the second bridegroom who restores the proper order to his island home.

Instead, he finds himself leaving his would be bride, and once again embracing the chaos of his new home. Whereas he had believed that in a land where the 'real and the fabulous have not yet gone their separate ways' there was 'nothing to prevent our fables taking root' (17), he ultimately realises that the fables of the old home are as alien to these shores as are the language, the way of seeing, the knowledge, and the sense of order which he brought with him.

In the act of writing his journal, the narrator has once more been brought into contact with his language, and in the process begins to rediscover himself: 'I fitted a nib to the pen, dipped it in the inkwell and made a mark on a sheet of paper: I.' (173) As he writes the narrator also makes a conscious effort to regain his speaking voice. Again a captive, he sits writing his journal and spending 'day in and day out to work at the task of teaching myself to talk again' (161). At the conclusion of the journal, as he is about to reclaim his physical freedom, he is able to announce that 'I have regained the full power

of speech' (199). If it is words and language that have brought him to this situation, so too they have the power to release him. He announces to Mrs Atholl that, 'This is the kind of man who writes to you, using words to take captivity captive' (185). And just as words were an explorer's tool as much as his compass, the narrator begins to write himself towards his ultimate destination. By regaining his identity and escaping to the forest, he is aware that he is returning to a landscape to which he can never truly belong, but it is the only place where he will find the chance to bring forth a new way of living in the new land.

Continued isolation is therefore the narrator's fate, and this isolation is one more mark that distinguishes the narrator from other Australian explorers. For all their self-conscious hero creation and their privileging of the position of the leader over other members of the party, the exploratory expeditions and the journals that resulted from those expeditions, were a testament to the values and common interests of a community. The expansion of empire was a shared project, and even if the empire was not composed of a community of equals, this did little to impinge upon a widely shared zeal for the discovery of new land over which the flag could be unfurled. Exploration was undertaken on behalf of the imperial community, and therein lay the explorer's justification for personal honours.

The Second Bridegroom on the other hand is the journal of the explorer that Australia never had. He is an explorer who tries to see the layered meanings beneath the surface of an alien environment, who struggles to understand the land as it exists beyond those features which can be 'discovered' or possessed in the cause of the Empire, and who is prepared to engage with the process by which 'such a frail ideal as a new life or a new society' (125) is born.

By constructing the narrator as an explorer Hall points the way to the scale and nature of the challenge involved, as the land awaits the discovery of the nuances of meaning contained in an alien space. With its emphasis on the narrator's isolation and the dislocation

between his old world and the new, *The Second Bridegroom* invites being read as an allegory of the post-colonial predicament, and in particular of the suspension of belonging that occurs as the settler society strives to come to terms with the forms of seeing and knowing demanded by the new land.

'CORNERS OF IT HAVE BEEN MAPPED': *THE ISLAND IN THE MIND*

In his later novel, *The Island in the Mind* (1996),¹⁴⁰ Hall returned yet again to his theme of the exploration of Australia as a land which exists more as an idea than as a fully realised and occupied homeland. On this occasion he reaches back even further, to the seventeenth century, when Terra Australis Incognita existed as a lacuna hovering at the edge of the European imagination. *The Island in the Mind* is comprised of three loosely connected novellas, each of which addresses Europe's growing awareness of, and belief in, the existence of a large and unexplored continental land mass in the southern oceans. The action of the three novellas moves gradually closer to the discovery of Australia, both temporally and geographically, and culminates in a shipwreck on the continent's northern coastline.

In this triptych Hall again works with notions of exploration in order to interrogate the interaction of Europeans with the last of all discovered lands. The second novella 'The lonely traveller by night', depends upon an inversion of the usual paradigm of European man exploring amongst the islands and natives of the south seas, in that it tells the story of an Aboriginal explorer, Yuramiru, who has made his way from central Australia to the Levant. He carries with him memories of his homeland, and aware of his impending death, he manages to impart this knowledge into the dreams of his companion and narrator of the story, Isabella Manin, a young Venetian girl.

Out from among the dreamed bushes, the land stretches ahead, completely and perfectly flat. Hundreds of miles in every direction, maybe thousands for all I know, there is flatness . . . I wake in my sleep to a glittering mirage of morning, space trembles like a lake, swallowing the future. I know this is a mirage because although I see water covering the land ahead I never reach it. Everything is dry. (281–282)

Through these dreams Isabella becomes an explorer of a land she has never visited. For her, Australia becomes quite literally a land in the mind, teasing her imagination in much the same way as it tantalises the European desire for the riches and mystery which await the explorers of the unknown south land.

In the third novella, 'Lord Hermaphrodite', Hall again uses the form of an explorer's journal. This time the journal is kept by trader and entrepreneur Richard Godolphin on an expedition to locate the renowned pirate Joshua Shilling, also known as Lord Hermaphrodite, in order that the pirate may help Godolphin to establish trade links on the profitable eastern routes.

When Shilling is eventually located, he is far more interested in exploration than he is in trade. In particular he admires Columbus, who persevered when 'the meretricious world of family and utility and profit fell away. And the true, singular beauty of the imagined quest stood clear before him' (484). For Shilling the 'imagined quest' is his dream of locating the unexplored south land. The pirate turned explorer tells Richard that:

. . . I have in mind the biggest prize of all. A land where no white man ever trod. I know it is there. Little corners of it have been mapped – enough to suggest how immense it is . . . Certainly the greatest island on earth. (533)

Shilling is an explorer after the manner of Murnane's quester. What he hopes to discover is not just another source of riches or profit, but rather he is intent on entering 'a world beyond himself' (484). His ambition is such that he attaches his hopes to discovering a land which exceeds all systems of knowledge, and which exists beyond the capacity of the imagination to believe that it might exist. Only such a singular attainment could satisfy his immense longing for the discovery of the mystery that is himself.

Insofar as we imagine the unknown it is already *known* as the unknown. Already here inside us. I believed that the only contentment I could expect in life would be to match the unknown already in my heart with an unknown land – vast, trackless, breeding weird concatenations of beasts, hellish things of mixed wings and scales, flying worms and walking fish . . . or perhaps a land of no beasts at all, perhaps a thousand miles of mud with not even a seabird in the sky – that would be satisfying – perhaps an illusory island which, once trodden on, would suck you down and swallow you in swirling mists'. (493)

Shilling eventually has his wish. His ship is wrecked in a storm on the shore of a 'crouching, sinister and impenetrable' (539) coast, which is almost certainly the south land of his dreams. Richard, on an accompanying ship, withdraws from the coast and rides out the storm, only to return and find that 'Terra Incognita had vanished' (545). He is left to ponder on the fate of the explorer who pursues this new land; a place which can be mapped and occupied, but which seems destined to remain forever elusive and unknowable.

For those who care the goal is always beyond reach. Is it any wonder that we only ever arrive there in spirit? The island in the mind can never be ours. (567)

John McLaren has written of the impact of explorer literature that:

Mitchell's vision of a new golden age and Sturt's image of the lonely explorer struggling with his own doubts in a hostile or indifferent world provided myths that have endured in Australian writing and in the idea of Australia.¹⁴¹

Hall's fiction is one site where these dual myths of the Antipodean Eden and hell continue to do battle. Whereas the early explorers of inland Australia saw this battle in terms of the capacity of the land to physically meet the commercial and aesthetic requirements of an expanding empire, Hall has recast it in terms which emphasise the ongoing struggle by individuals to discover a spiritually sustaining homeland. In doing so, he has expanded the range and the vocabulary of the myths of exploration by wresting them from the hands of those who addressed the land as an opportunity to expand the empire and made public history in the process. Instead, he attempts to show something of the way in which non-Aboriginals have been required to 'explore' their relationship with a land which continues to present closely linked physical and spiritual challenges. Hall's fiction shows an Australia that remains very much in the process of being 'discovered', as successive generations continue to ask questions about what it means to make it their home.

Jungian critic David Tacey has written of Hall's concern with 'the mythopoetic reawakening of consciousness',¹⁴² and emphasised his capacity to draw upon and elucidate aspects of both the black and white 'dreaming' about Australia. However, if, as Tacey argues, Hall's fiction shows us something of the strength and aptness of Aboriginal dreaming, he is also aware that this dreaming will not readily be made a part of non-Aboriginal understanding of the land.

In examining the ongoing task for the non-Aboriginal imagination to interact with the land and create something from its spiritual presence that can co-exist with the Aboriginal dreaming, Hall has

cast back to the fundamental proto-myths derived from the European experience in the exploration and settling of the continent. He finds in these myths, with their constant reiteration of the gulf that separated desire from fulfilment, an adequate representation of the difficulty of making a home in a new land. At the point at which Hall's own explorers seem about to engage with the land it inevitably slips from their grasp, effacing their attempts to make sense of it or overwrite it with their own comforting version of 'home'.

Australia remains in Hall's fiction – as it does in Murnane's – as an idea rather than a fully realised homeland. His version of Australia continues to exist as it always has for Europeans and the settler society, as a place teasing their capacity for wonder and inviting exploration, but always remaining tantalisingly beyond reach. The land remains much as it did at the conclusion of *The Island in the Mind*, when Joshua Shilling flings himself at the coast that represents the barest outline of an idea that rests within the collective consciousness of his race. As a result he is swallowed by a land that not only resists his advances but which once again disappears into the expanses of the southern oceans. Hall's fiction suggests that Australia remains as it always has been for explorers of all types, a 'land in the mind', glitteringly attractive yet wholly elusive:

clouds of wildflowers tumbled from the ceiling to dangle by the fragile threads just above the table; they hung there, stirred by the delighted gasps of the assembly, settling finally to form a map of Australia. The lights went off and each flower was seen to cradle a fleck of phosphorus. Momentarily the magic country hovered in mind, so fragile no one dared breathe. And then in tiny irregularities its light went out. (*Kisses of the Enemy*, 449)

CONCLUSION

Thea Astley, Gerald Murnane and Rodney Hall are far from being the only recent Australian novelists to draw upon exploration tropes. The use of explorer figures and themes derived from exploration on occur in a number of novels published during the same period. These include Dal Stiven's *A Horse of Air* (1970), Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980), Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), Thomas Keneally's *Woman of the Inner Sea* (1992), Margaret Simons's *The Ruthless Garden* (1993), and Liam Davison's *Soundings* (1993).¹⁴³

Also finding expression in recent Australian fiction is the related theme – so important to Murnane's quester and to several of Astley's heroes – of mapping strategies and the extent of personal mediation involved in the construction of maps. Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* (1996), James Bradley's *Wrack* (1997) and James Cowan's *A Mapmaker's Dream* (1997) all examine the extent to which maps are a reflection of the individuals and the circumstances which gave birth to them.¹⁴⁴ As Fra Mauro, cartographer and the narrator of *A Mapmaker's Dream* reflects:

Each of us has the right to speak of his coastline, his mountains, his deserts, none of which conforms to those of another. Individually we are obligated to make a map of our own homeland, our own field or meadow. We carry engraved in our hearts the map of the world as we know it. (131)

And, Murnane might add, as we dream it, and as we remember it.

The use of explorer-derived tropes as used by these novelists has much in common with that of Astley, Murnane and Hall. Each is working at a subversion of the ideals of imperialism and the common destiny which were the foundations of the colonial adventure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a principal agent in the promotion and transmission of these ideals into the furthestmost reaches of the continent, the explorer and his myths are likewise examined and subverted. These novelists, seeking to articulate their experience as post-colonial Australians, have not only resurrected and implicated the explorer in his original incarnation as the champion of faded imperial values, but have also given him new life as the contemporary seeker setting out to discover the meanings which might yet unite aspects of the Australian imagination.

As with the explorers of nineteenth-century Australia, these are concerns that are intimately connected with the land. Astley, Murnane and Hall each write in order to further the understanding of the relationship between Australian people and Australian landscapes. Their fiction is unified by a concern for the way an individual's conception of themselves is shaped in response to the physical space they occupy. In doing so, they address fundamental metaphysical issues, as they go beyond the task of describing what a space looks like, and address issues related to what it means for their characters to inhabit this space called 'Australia' rather than any other.

This is a quest which had its tentative beginnings in the journals kept by the inland explorers, who despite their primary interest in discovering the 'general face of the country', had also begun to probe hesitantly at its implied meanings. There is therefore a sense in which these novelists pay homage to the explorer. For although their fiction serves to subvert the myths of imperialism, heroism and exploration, they also draw upon those same myths to add resonance to the quest that is at the core of their novels. There is an acknowledgment that

the explorers, despite their adherence to values that are now treated with caution, have been their predecessors in the search for the 'meanings' of the great southern continent.

What further unifies the imagination of this group of novelists, and makes their use of explorer-derived tropes particularly apposite, is that they use their fiction to record a failure on the part of their explorer figures to discover the metaphysical centre to the land. They create memorable characters who undertake journeys which are intended to lead them to some form of discovery or revelation, only to find they are defeated by factors similar to those which confronted the explorers who set out in search of the continent's physical features.

First among these factors is the alien nature of the land. The same vast, baffling, and indifferent landscapes that overwhelmed the explorers still await those who travel, either literally or imaginatively, into the centre of continental Australia. Astley and Hall in particular remind readers that familiarity with the land born of trans-generational links does not necessarily ease the acceptance and understanding of its strangeness, and the land must be rediscovered by individuals in successive generations. The bulk of the continent is not given to permanent occupation or settlement, and there remains always, in Astley's oft-used phrase, the 'tension between landscape and flesh'.

Allied to this alien quality in the land is the sense of absence, the 'nothingness'. Beyond the still troubling desolation and lack of spectacle, there is about the land something elusive and ineffable which refuses to proffer up its meanings. If the undisclosed centre and the spectral inland sea served to symbolise the failure and the dwindling hopes of the explorers and the empire, then they find an analogue in these novels in the fruitless quests to grasp the metaphysical or spiritual essence of the land. Belle in *Reaching Tin River*, the film-maker in *The Plains* and the narrator in *The Second Bridegroom*, all address themselves to the questions of what is this land, and what does it mean? They each catch fleeting and alluring

glimpses of their goal, but they come away puzzled and defeated, unable to move beyond a bewilderment which drives them to a self-defeating contemplation of their own spiritual emptiness and an implied questioning of their place in landscapes such as these.

The difficult nature of the land is also coupled with a sense of loss derived from the failure of the expectations that were held for it. The palpable disappointment expressed by those who explored on behalf of the empire, is reflected in these novels in the failure of the fiction to reveal the metaphysical heart of the continent. Explorers and novelists alike fall back upon images of a failed or lost Eden to express their despair as they realise that the revelation they hoped to discover at the centre of the continent remains beyond reach. Shirley Hazzard captured the similarity between the disappointments suffered by the inland explorers and the failure of her own latter-day seekers at the conclusion of *The Bay of Noon*, using a simile which highlights the emptiness of the land and the deceptiveness of its signs.

We are like those early explorers of Australia who died of thirst on expeditions to the dead centre of a continent, always thinking they must come ultimately to water – to an inland sea, to a lake, a river, a cascade. Deceived by salt deposits, by rivers that flowed inland, by the fossils of seashells, they were driven on by incredulity as well – by disbelief that one could come so far without drawing nearer to what one sought.¹⁴⁵

Hazzard's comparison is a reminder that to the traveller of Australian spaces, be they seeking physical or metaphysical rewards, the land remains a tempting site for exploration because it is constantly attended by the promise of revelation. Explorers were drawn on by the belief that no matter how poor their present landscapes, something better, perhaps even the longed for inland sea, may yet be at hand. Open vistas and wide horizons promised so

much, but in effect led only to more of the same. Moreover, the explorers were constantly taunted by mirages which lured them towards waters which receded and evaporated as they approached, and in doing so provided a lasting symbol of the elusive nature of the inland sea and of Australian exploration in general. As Charles Sturt discovered, the land could be not only evasive, but deceptive:

it appeared as if the river was decoying us into a desert, there to leave us in difficulty and in distress. The very mirage had the effect of boundlessness in it (and) cheated us with an appearance of water, and on arriving at the spot, we found a continuation of the same scorching plain, over which we were moving, instead of the stream we had hoped for. (*Two Expeditions*, II, 58)

Similarly, Murnane's quester discovers that the flat, open landscapes of the inland have a habit of swallowing the very things that they promise to reveal. And others who move into the land in their search for personal meanings, are also drawn on by mirage-like temptations which evaporate as they draw near. It is just such a vision of Emmie dancing in the landscape which leads Wafer to his fate in *An Item From the Late News*, killed by men who had gone in search of their own non-existent El Dorado, and having already been warned by the wise Doss that their dreams are 'all mirage stuff' (84).

By undertaking the journey in the form of fictional expeditions, these novelists assume the position of a new generation of explorers. They explore in search of their own destinations, but they are read and studied for what they can tell us about the current state of the 'empire' as we now know it: that is, the shared experience of being Australian. In this way the novels of Astley, Murnane and Hall toy with the defining paradigm which provides the narrative tension to the explorers' journals: on one hand, the desire to structure the journey and the text in such a way that the future of the empire was

paramount; and on the other hand ensuring that the explorer-author was presented as a solitary hero. It is a tension that spills over into these novels, as the explorer figures encounter turning points at which they must decide to continue their exploration on behalf of their community, or pursue their search in an attempt to satisfy entirely personal goals. In *Reaching Tin River* Belle casts off her communal obligations in order to dedicate herself to a search for her personal goals, and when these fail her she makes tentative efforts to re-establish her relationships with her family and community. The film-maker in *The Plains* undertakes his exploration for the meaning of the plains on behalf of the empire/community represented by the plainsmen, but the idiosyncratic nature of his quest eventually drives him into an entirely personal search for the landscapes which lie in his own centre. Hall's narrator in *The Second Bridegroom* arrives in the new settlement as part of the attempt to extend the colony and to further the expansion of the empire, but by escaping he immediately commits himself to an entirely solitary quest. His struggle thereafter is to reconcile his personal journey with a lingering desire to rejoin his life with those who represent the values of the empire and community from which he is estranged.

Finally, there is also the belief, which perseveres beyond the lessons of experience, that the effort is still worthwhile. Just as some explorers were eventually able to embrace the experience of travelling for its own sake no matter how unrewarding it was in terms of providing the discoveries they had hoped for, those who go in search of the land's more numinous qualities must also learn to accept that the journey itself may provide their only satisfaction. There comes a point when the explorer figures choose to indulge their personal need to draw some meaning from, and understanding of, the space they occupy. It is a search which is destined for failure, but which nonetheless becomes an alluring and even obsessive journey in itself. As with Ernest Giles, their commitment is to the fact of the journey

rather than the act of discovery. Their true discovery is that, as Richard White has concluded:

we will never arrive at the 'real' Australia. From the attempts of others to get there, we can learn much about the travellers and the journey itself, but nothing about the destination. There is none.¹⁴⁶

Australians occupy a country bedevilled with a paradox: on one hand there is the obsessive search for a national identity and the 'real' Australia, and on the other hand the lingering belief that such goals are as uncertain or unreachable as those mirages that lured explorers ever further into the deserts. And therein lies the ultimate justification for the use of tropes derived from exploration. The experience of exploration in Australia provides an irresistible paradigm of the 'journey' that is undertaken in search of unattainable goals – unattainable because in all likelihood they either do not exist or are wholly beyond reach. And part of the attraction of the explorer-hero and the quest motif to these writers is surely that the ultimate goal remains so resolutely beyond discovery. It is the perseverance in the quest for the unattainable goal that brings the explorer into the twentieth century, and allows this group of novelists to add a postmodern gloss to some of the earliest Australian proto-myths derived from the failure to locate the utopia at the centre of the continent. If the story of Australian exploration teaches anything, from Oxley's bewildered and puzzled reaction to a first experience of the interior; to Eyre's championing of the solitary and heroic endeavour of the individual explorer pitted against the land; to Giles's obsessive determination to value the journey for its own sake; it is that this is a land ripe for postmodern configurations – a land without an absolute centre and in which meaning is shifting and elusive, a land in which the promise of new beginnings is forever coupled with a sense of ancient indifference, a land in which the journey must serve as its own destination.

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ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

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- 3 Richard Brome, *The Antipodes: a Comedie*, (1640: London, Edward Arnold, 1967), p. 30.
- 4 Denis Vairasse, *The History of the Sevarites or Severambi, a Nation Inhabiting a Part of the Third Continent Commonly Called Terra Australes Incognitae*, (London: Henry Brome, 1675).
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- 7 Mary Fox, *An Account of an Expedition to the Interior of New Holland*, (London, Richard Bentley, 1837).
- 8 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 117.
- 9 These conflicting positions have been expressed in Philip Drew, *The Coast Dwellers*, (Ringwood, Penguin, 1994); and, David Tacey, *Edge of the Sacred*,

- (North Blackburn, Harper Collins, 1995).
- 10 Deane Fergie, 'Evanescant, oscillating, never quite settled upon', in Caroline Guerin (et al) eds, *Crossing Lines*, (Adelaide, Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1996), p. 23.
 - 11 Robert Sellick, 'The explorer as hero: Australian exploration and the literary imagination', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia, South Australian Branch*, 78, 1977, pp.1–16; Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).
 - 12 Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise*, p. xiii.
 - 13 Patrick White, *Voss*, (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957); *A Fringe of Leaves* (New York, Viking, 1977).

CHAPTER 1

- 14 A discussion of explorers and class can be found in Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 27–31.
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- 16 *Historical Records of Australia*, Ser. I, vol. 8, p. 171.
- 17 John Oxley, *Journals of Two Expeditions Into the Interior of New South Wales, Undertaken by Order of the British Government in the Years 1817–18*, (London, John Murray, 1820), p.360. Future references will be indicated in the text with the abbreviation, *JTE*.
- 18 Robert Sellick, *The Epic Confrontation: Australian Explorers and the Centre 1813–1900, a Literary Study*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1973), pp. 45–56. See also, Robert Sellick, 'From the outside in: European ideas of exploration and the Australian experience', in *Australia and the European Imagination*, (Canberra, Humanities Research Centre, 1982), pp. 173–183.
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 - 25 The auction catalogue for Oxley's library can be obtained from the Mitchell Library as part of manuscript No A5322. Details of Oxley's library are also included in, Robert Dixon, *The Course of Empire*, (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 92, and, Helen Proudfoot, 'A continent without maps', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 79:1 & 2, 1993, p. 22.
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 - 29 Dixon, *The Course of Empire*, p. 101.
 - 30 For an examination of some of the exaggerated claims made by Mitchell in his journals, see Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, pp. 126-135.
 - 31 Edward John Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King George Sound in the Years 1840-1*, (London, T. & W. Boone, 1845), vol. I, p. 92. Future references will be indicated in the text with the abbreviation, *JED*.
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 - 34 B. F. de Vries, 'The lure of the wild', *Australian Historical Geography*, 1, 1980, p. 29.
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