

## Circling the centre : the pursuit of an Australian Heartland

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JOËL BONNEMAISON represented more to me than a respected research colleague: to use the most honourable and straightforwardly Australian language he enjoyed so much, he was a particularly generous and reliable friend, a good « mate ». In Gascony, Paris, Canberra, Melbourne and points between, and in correspondence extending over a period of fifteen years, we conducted a lively exchange on our respective attachments to place, nation, region and family – and on the complex momentum of the scholarly vocation which seemed to bring those threads together, but was in fact anchored by them. For me, the most elegant of his published works was based on an analysis of an unusual example of cultural resistance to the impact of Westernisation on a tiny Pacific island. Joël was deeply intrigued by my own psychological voyage from Britain, my original island-home, and by my anxious embrace of Australia. I recall quite vividly that, discussing my observations on an early version of the English translation of *La dernière île*, he seemed close to persuading me that Australia had become my special island and that, if I had become one of its protectors, then clearly it was in return my sword, shield and sustenance. With certain reservations about degrees of

reciprocity, I had planned to concede that point to him, and now do so.

The present paper examines another side of the story narrated in *La dernière île* by illustrating an aspect of the continuing evolution of Western cultures in my adopted country during the twentieth century. Whereas Joël concentrated on the stubbornly heroic cultural adaptations made by Tanna's indigenous people, I shall sketch some of the accommodations made by small, prodigiously remote Western communities to the startling novelty of an island-continent. The focus is on the vast and arid interior, known simply and otherwise to Australians as « the Centre ».

### **A nation for a continent ?**

Although the six Australian colonies federated in 1901, the event scarcely signalled a dramatic efflorescence of the collective geographical imagination. On the contrary, the decision was somewhat premature and it soon became clear that loyalty to the old political units, now individual states, was not easily surrendered to that lofty abstraction, the « nation ». Over the next

few decades, changing perceptions of the Centre would reflect and foster an improved community of interest, and the roots of those perceptions are to be found in the colonial era (Powell, 1991a).

1. Federation did not originate as a populist cause, but intellectuals and romantics had been moderately successful in identifying and promoting a range of authentic *Australian* achievements, traits, fauna, flora and landscapes. During the 1880s, for the first time, the native-born formed a majority. Ideas about the Centre would assist in the quest for national unity, but were themselves seeded in the place-making engagements of earlier generations of immigrants. Progressively less constrained by inheritances of British tastes and sensitivities, artists, balladists and writers celebrated the display of light, colour and experience in the world around them. Australia's scientists had needed no such conversion. From the outset, colonial scientific associations had been intensely interested in the continent's unique environments and indigenous peoples. During the first half of the nineteenth century, « science » joined romance in a long quest for an inland sea and a « lost civilisation » in the far interior. The myth fascinated many early colonists. By the 1860s it had evaporated; then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, stories of the heroic explorations it had spawned came into vogue, and the mysterious Centre began to renew its spell.

2. There were other reasons for this revived interest in the interior. The 1890s brought a deep economic depression, made deeper still by an imperious drought in 1894-1902. One curious (and complex) repercussion was a loss of faith in the coastal cities, the culpable pivots of commerce and manufacturing, where the bulk of Australia's very small white population (3.8 million in 1901) resided. Yet those same cities had been accommodating a growing

number of « natural history » clubs and societies, quite notably so after the 1880s, and urban recreationists were regularly venturing into the surrounding « bush ». Suburban hobbyists prepared to collect quantities of unusual plants, birds, fossils and Aboriginal implements *ad infinitum* were at first merely bemused, rather than alarmed, by the introduction of new scientific rigour accompanying the gradual acceptance of Darwinian notions (Griffiths, 1996). Most educated Australians felt obliged to absorb the opinions of « Social-Darwinists » on the « inevitable » demise of the Australian Aborigine, and the capacity of the white race to prosper in warm temperate environments and tropical conditions. And much of that swirling mixture of preoccupations came famously together in the planning of more grand sorties into the interior – pre-eminently, the Elder (1891-2) and above all the Horn (1894) Expeditions.

Horn's enterprise warrants emphasis on several counts: it advertised intercolonial and interdisciplinary cooperation, succeeded in injecting scientific theory without abandoning the tasks of collection and elementary mapping, and placed a high premium on expert inquiries into geological structures, feral and native fauna, and the characteristics of indigenous human communities (Morton and Mulvaney, 1996). In restrained fashion, this precursor of the « field survey » approaches of the twentieth century announced the co-existence of a frontier region with distinctive intellectual and perhaps patriotic claims. Its primary locus was an area around and to the west of Alice Springs, with a south-westerly extension to the extraordinary monolith of Ayers Rock. Subsequent conceptualisations would extend that central territory in every direction, but never offered precise definitions. The most popular depictions favour an area with a radius between 600 and 800 km of Alice Springs. As the plainer facts of federation sank

in, Australians would find compelling reasons, both scientific and non-scientific, to give still more consideration to their inheritance of this « empty » Centre. A kind of « no-man's land » extending across the borders of Queensland, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia, and dauntingly inaccessible from the bases of settlement, it was soon earmarked for – or left to – the new federal authorities. The tasks it provided would help to define a less parochial, more thoroughly *national* political agenda, without loss to either science or romance.

### **Dead, Red and Redeemable**

1. As Australians learnt the necessity of expanding their geographical imagination – they had just become, after all, the only nation on earth in possession of an entire continent – as focus of the continental interior the Centre was rendered psychologically distinguishable from the protean « Outback », a term which was applied more or less indiscriminately to all the remoter « bush » or rural districts. The seemingly contradictory means by which it received this endorsement might be summarised in one word: publicity. The point to make here is that, while the most effective images usually carry arresting titles, in this case directly competing images, opposed valuations, succeeded in raising the region's profile in the public mind.

Geologist J.W. Gregory promoted the title « Dead Heart » in a celebrated book, published in 1906. Unlike most of his peers, Gregory seemed confident that his literary skills would assist him to communicate the various « charms of the desert », but the demands of his professional vocation brought sceptical scientific insights which would expose the romantic speculations about the Centre (Gregory, 1906). Regarding its northern perimeter (especially in Queensland), he was convinced that the rapid

exploitation of artesian water was in danger of exhausting a limited natural resource. Its southern section, an area as extensive as the combined national territories of France, Spain and Portugal, was dominated by a massive internal drainage system focussed on Lake Eyre. Gregory recognised that this was the very fulcrum of the region, the key to its ecological system, and if he was less sensitive to any national psychic investment that was because there was then no pressing need to do so. He described the Lake Eyre Basin as the residual of a primeval inland sea, arguably a « once fertile and creative » territory in some distant era, which had become « barren and inert ». Painstakingly reviewing grandiose schemes designed to flood the Basin by means of a canal cut from Spencer Gulf (and hence the Southern Ocean), he suggested they resembled some earlier eccentric proposals for the northern Sahara, and produced estimates to show that the most generous concessions to narrow engineering feasibility could not be extended to condone exaggerated and irrational claims for widespread climatic amelioration.

His *Dead Heart of Australia* set the tone for the contributions of other scientific generalists to the emergent national consciousness. One of the most colourful of these interpreters was T. Griffith Taylor, a doughty pioneer of academic geography who tried valiantly to convert the public to an « environmental limits » philosophy (Powell, 1993). In 1911, Taylor employed a simple methodology, based on that philosophy, to forecast a total national population of about 19 million at the end of the twentieth century. Over the next two decades, he became embroiled in a fiery contest with the champions of an « Australia Unlimited » campaign which envisaged population projections of 50, 100 and even 500 million. Taylor's pugnacious appraisals variously described large swathes of the Centre as « uninhabited », « almost useless », « no

present value for stock » and so on. He was unequivocal in recommending that domestic and foreign investment be stringently confined, for the foreseeable future, to the comparatively well-endowed fringes – which offered an enormous expanse of territory by European and most international standards, anyway.

The Australia Unlimited rallying-cry was closely allied to a resurgent form of postwar nationalism-imperialism which argued that the country's « vast empty spaces » (like those of Canada) would provide *lebensraum* for the white inhabitants of the British Empire, thereby reviving its great international mission and maintaining the global balance of power. Astute politicians and bureaucrats were well aware that favoured nations within the imperial fold could expect increases in capital investment. It is nonetheless difficult to comprehend the apparent success of the bizarre corruptions of spatial reasoning which flavoured the campaign. Briefly, the most significant of these reckonings drummed home the argument that, since Australia's national territory was roughly as extensive as that of the United States, and far exceeded that of Western Europe, the scope for further development must therefore be virtually endless.

Taylor's indignant response was to cite the presence of geographically analogous regions of some notoriety in the wider world – North Africa, for example. Nationalist-imperialist boosters accused him of treachery and black pessimism ; he was savagely lampooned in the populist press ; and his deployment of « arid » and « desert » across the western Centre earned indignant rebukes from patriotic and influential Western Australians, who ensured that his textbook on the geography of Australia was formally banned in that isolated and insecure state. At a high point in the debate, his protagonists hired a noted « possibilist » from North America to tour the purportedly maligned Centre and to wage battle in the daily

press with the archetypal « environmental determinist » – thus, one of academic geography's more seminal global controversies, captured and to some extent actually anticipated in the provincial antipodean media.

2. Soldiers and war correspondents returning from fronts in the Middle East were keen to discover more about their own desert heritage. They swelled the ranks of contemporaries who had found special reasons for disputing Taylor's stark pronouncements. A kind of candid patriotism is implied once again, but it was inseparable from the common need of reflective immigrants to seek spiritual sustenance in the adopted home, rather than surviving from one generation to the next in a state of emotional exile. In short, there were intensifications of the intellectual and aesthetic trends of the late colonial era ; that became very noticeable during the Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. Privileged by a new-found respect and affection arising from these developments, the Centre was given a more positive image. Its new title was the *Red Heart*. As indicated in a flurry of immensely popular and (partly responsive) scientific publications, the reference was generally to the region's trademark sands and soils, and most pointedly to the throbbing luminescence of the enigmatic, powerfully symbolic Ayers Rock. In these conceptions, the territory signified in *Red Heart* was truly *living space*: Taylor's attempts at rationalistic interment came to naught.

It is vital to deflect metropolitan presumptions of a merely elitist preoccupation. There were many highly successful popularisations: some of the books, for example, ran into several editions, with sales in the scores of thousands – this, in a comparatively well-educated, generally prosperous and largely urbanised nation which numbered less than six million in the mid-1920s. For a steady succession of writers, artists and scientists, the Centre became much

more than a rite of passage: it took on the status of a *hadj*. Pilgrims alternately tested themselves and their equipment against the elements, made notes on the customs and rituals of the indigenous inhabitants, collected specimens, drew or painted and shared those skills with native artists. Directly and vicariously, the same alarmists who had excluded non-whites from the immigration programmes could now rejoice at the undeniably *Australian* character of the Centre, acknowledge the qualities of uncontaminated indigenous ways, and occasionally even admit to a yearning to experience an equivalent companionship with aridity's distinctive landscapes – confessing, that is, to a passion for a kind of Aboriginality by osmosis.

3. New ideas for dramatic change in the interior served to burnish the image. The most robust of these was the aptly entitled *Boomerang Plan* of « Jack » (Ion) Idriess, one of Australia's most popular contemporary writers (Idriess, 1943). Essentially, Idriess reinflated old hopes for the « turning back » of selected eastern rivers into Lake Eyre, thus definitively redeeming the Centre. This scheme was refined in the proposal of renowned engineer J.J.C. Bradfield, of Sydney Harbor Bridge fame. As a special brand of wishful thinking it extended back to Gregory's day – and much further. Cargo-cultish, it refused to go away, despite repeated contemptuous dismissals from national and international environmental experts, and the issue added to the Centre's mystique.

The new evaluations were not diminished by a seeming naiveté: indeed, that was of course part of the appeal. Even before World War II, but especially during the later 1940s and 1950s, no travel book in Australia was considered complete without a section on the Centre. It had become emblematic. At first, only the wealthier Australians could indulge in the visits urged on them by these authors, but increa-

sing numbers eventually did so, and the cinema and other forms of armchair-travelling compensated the remainder. The flood of European immigrants into the cities seemed to break some of the spell of the Centre after the 1950s, but it would be reinvigorated in the closing decades of the century.

## Rationalism and Genuflection

1. Seldom well understood – then or now – in Europe, Australia's chapter of the Cold War saga commenced in earnest in 1942, with the capitulation of Britain's much-vaunted Singapore garrison to Japanese troops and the bombing of Darwin. Advocates of a shift from British to American protectors argued that the Centre's true *raison d'être* was simply as strategic *buffer*. In that representation, neglect or underdevelopment was more than acceptable: it was preferable.

Firm consensus was never reached on the military significance of the Centre and its « Top End » (far North) neighbour, and the buffer concept contended with other security-conscious visualisations from the last years of World War II until the 1960s. *Frontier* emerged as the obvious alternative image. According to its critics, this notion promoted an « EDNA » (or Economic Development of the North) complex, which became implicated in a succession of expensive projects in tropical Australia: the construction and servicing of a network of long-distance « beef roads » for the burgeoning export meat industry ; gigantic irrigation schemes ; and new investments in sugar cane and a range of plantation crops (Powell, 1991b). Most of these projects impinged on the Centre but their major impacts were dispersed across its eastern, northern and northwestern margins. A related proposal regarding the completion of the shelved section of the south-north transcontinental railway, connecting

Alice Springs and Darwin, was frequently put and just as often soundly rejected.

In the public mind the status of the Centre could not be detached from the steadily growing visibility of the Northern Territory in national affairs. Originally under South Australian and then (after 1911) federal jurisdiction, the Territory was slowly groomed for greater political autonomy until 1978, when a separate elected parliament was established in Darwin *en route* to the eventual declaration of full statehood. Without entirely shaking off a dubious reputation for rough frontier attitudes and the provision of refuge for southern misfits and disreputables, the Territory generally prospered under a management regime for which it was, naturally, a « core » rather than a peripheral responsibility. Other Australians followed this gradual maturation alertly, but where major public images of the Centre were concerned most of the discussion stressed the same trinity of themes which had attracted public attention during the interwar and early postwar years: the physical environment, indigenous communities, and tourism. The remainder of the present sketch selects a few of the issues that blended these leading concerns, while in the process accruing a degree of national significance which restored some lost definition to the Centre.

2. It would be possible to commence this final section with a narration of the furious reactions to the federal government's decision to permit the construction of a United States communications facility at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, which became operational in 1969. The protest rhetoric consistently emphasised the symbolic affront to Australia's national sovereignty of a war-orientated facility in the heart of Australia, which could be targeted by a hostile power. Another option concerns the national and international responses to spectacular floods (1950, 1974, 1984), when the strange salt

depression of Lake Eyre was comprehensively filled and the deserts experienced a stupendous transformation. Each remarkable resuscitation brought a vivid renewal – the heart of Australia beating once more, a *Green* « Centre » transmitting another message (what ?) to the presumptuous invaders.

3. But different conflations and collisions of water magic, community identity and a maturing national conscience provide my concluding examples. The first shows how a threatened recidivism towards natural resources was thwarted in didactic style. The second concerns the (perhaps triumphally) enunciated persistence of the Centre's Aboriginal groups – the legatees of those indigenous folk whose ways of living had demonstrated to interwar sojourners an environmental rapport that was incontrovertibly Australian.

The aptly-named « Channel Country » sustains Lake Eyre and an impressively coordinated heterogeneity of native and introduced flora and fauna. Its seasonally-flooded, semi-arid plains provided a classic theatre for heroic cross-continental treks, a field of honour for larger-than-life « kings in grass castles » (pastoral pioneers) – the ranchers (graziers) or « station » owners, a treaty zone between society and nature. Cooper's (or Cooper) Creek was known in every Australian school for its association with the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition. Its tough frontier conditions had been immortalised in popular novels, short stories and ballads. But its old Australian staples of beef and wool were in decline ; by the early 1990s irrigated cotton had become the new glamour crop, slick entrepreneurs proposed harnessing the unregulated Cooper, and the development-hungry Queensland government opted for crudely accelerated legislation without recourse to an environmental impact statement. The cotton industry was perceived to be doubly tainted – by its foreign (American)

backing and by recent sensationalised media coverage of the charge that pesticide residues in export beef had been traced to supplementary feed derived from the waste of cotton crops.

Faced with the prospect of the sudden loss of critical water supplies and revered family heritage, Channel Country ranchers organised the early protests and succeeded in recruiting public sympathy from around the nation. They were soon joined by local indigenous communities and by politically astute environmentalists and scientists, who had been preparing a detailed World Heritage Nomination for the « desert wetlands » of the Lake Eyre system. Lake Eyre itself was located within South Australia and, historically, the governments of that state were super-sensitive about the « unilateral » actions of « upstream » neighbours ; a sharp and very public rebuke was despatched. The ranchers then declared that unless cotton, the « drought-maker », was forced to retreat, they would sever all connections with their customary political champions in the state and federal parliaments. At that point (1996) the Queensland government withdrew its endorsement.

The Battle of Cooper's Creek re-focused a predominantly urban, immigrant nation on its continuously unfolding, peculiarly geographical history. The furore was swiftly dramatised in the media as a set of stark polarities: national cultural and ecological icon *versus* tasteless developmentalism, the mighty dollar ; authentically native, family-based, cattle-raising tradition and historically-accredited landscape authorship *versus* modern, American-leaning, high-technology agribusiness with a dubious record ; the admired independence of vigorous station life, vividly storied, *versus* the connotations of slavery, poor sharecroppers and despised, money-shuffling futures brokers. So the heartland survived, apparently ; but the surprising coalition of interests which deliver-

ed that victory would soon be tested again, when variants on the old Boomerang Plan were aired in Queensland and in the federal parliament...

In truth, the 1990s were as nervous as the 1890s and clearly, one of the greatest uncertainties concerned the bond between land and community. The invading or immigrant culture, now based on an acclaimed multi-cultural and even multi-racial admixture, was understandably handicapped in its adaptation by a full-bored political marketing of its hypothetical membership of a bustling Asia-Pacific bloc, and by a less than perfect appreciation of Australia's geographical history. Yet the very maturation signified and fostered by the achievement of that domestic admixture guaranteed a more generous appreciation of the rights and values of the indigenous peoples, who were increasingly described as the « first Australians ».

In 1992 the Australian High Court delivered its decision that « Native Title » was part of the Common Law of Australia – thus rejecting the *terra nullius* assumption which had held that, at the time of the initial white invasion, the country was not already occupied by people who displayed a recognisable social and political organisation. A *Native Title Act* was passed in the following year. One interesting aspect of the legal process was that it derived from a case concerning some of Queensland's offshore islands (Mercer, 1995). A good deal of media and academic commentary was similarly drawn to « Aboriginal land rights » across the continent's northern periphery, where the prospects for establishing the required proofs of long-sustained occupancy seemed greater, since vibrant traditional cultures had survived. But these critiques often overlooked the earlier gains in the Centre, where generally similar continuities had already facilitated a number of resolutions supporting indigenous claims (Powell, 1991a). Certainly, by the early 1980s,

Aboriginal groups held freehold and leasehold rights over vast tracts of central Australia, and the sum of those areas and the recently declared national parks and conservation districts constituted the very core of the region.

Caught up in another anxious *fin-de-siècle*, Australians are still circling the Centre. But to circle something is also to set it apart, and perhaps to recognise that it warrants further contemplation. Metaphorical and real, today's journeys to the Centre may be as close as the archetypal Australian ever gets to admitting the necessity for ritual. The resonances with *La dernière île* (or *The Tree and the Canoe* – Bonnemaïson, 1994) are found in the ineluctable commonality of endless conjurings and confluences of place and culture. Joël Bonnemaïson introduced the wider world to the sacred places of Tanna, the cultural investments in the clusters of magical stories on the Loanatom coast. Modern Australians need their own sacred places, and without overextending the analogy, perhaps it is worth emphasising that many of them have shown a tendency to attach a type of spiritual emphasis to the Centre and to the enormous monolith which seems to be its proclaimed fulcrum.

More than ever, sunrise and sunset at Ayers Rock supply the most obvious opportunities for commingled international and national witnesses – a gigantic stone looming above a stark sand plain ; from some perspectives rounded, host-like. For global travellers, its pinks, reds and purples give each itinerary's compulsory spectacle, a trophy. What, then, of the Australian witnesses, in voluntary quarantine from the continent's workaday fringe, its hedonistic beach parade? Guided by moral compass along whitefella songlines, the pilgrims find a pulsing mystery that spurs the keenest interrogation about the burdens of cultural collision. Ayers Rock, named by the whites for one of their own, has officially become *Uluru* once more – the « great pebble »,

sacred to the Yankuntjatjara and Pitjantjatjara people. Yet we have also learnt to insist that the stone was already « possessed » – part of Nature's independent dynamic – before we, the invaders, pursued our acts of cultural dispossession and before any of those indigenous groups put down such sturdy roots. So the puzzling Centre continues to suggest a focussing challenge for a small nation in unlikely stewardship of a continent. As this Australian sketch proposes, place-making and nation-building must endlessly entwine in the spirals of our geographical histories and historical geographies.

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