



The Intuitions of Place

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Paper presented at
WA 2029: A shared journey
17-19 November 2004

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Is it true that everyone has a place at which they feel is the ultimate site on earth for which they feel affection? I would have thought so, but no. Some people do tell me they feel nothing for any place in which they have lived. This talk is not for them or about them.

Yet the opposite seems to be true: that any place in the world, any paddock, street corner, forest, cemetery, perhaps even a parking lot, can bind the spirit by memory and association as closely as can that picturesque cabin down there by the creek with smoke drifting from its chimney so beloved by landscape painters. Any place can be loved.

With how big an area can we feel familiarity or affection? Home can be based on an intimate knowledge of half a city. The poet Anna Couani:

Dad knew the city tracks. Not just the steps and pathways round the Cross, for example but he had a mental picture like a map. The short-cuts all the way from the coast to Parramatta which makes me think of Sydney as like a middle-eastern city, multi-layered and only readily knowable by people with that ancient knowledge.¹

Home can be a suburb:

It's me. Footscray is me. I know I'm happier here than I've been for years...I feel as if I've come home...I liked it very much, I do, and I won't be leaving here.²

Home is usually identified as one's own dwelling. The writer Drusilla Modjeska:

But still the centre of gravity is the inner city, and oddly enough it is here, in my corner house, with traffic on two sides of me, that I've begun to learn how to be still, and to accept that changes can come on small and undramatic ways.³

But home can be much smaller: it can be a single plant in the back garden:

¹ Anna Couani, 'Parramatta Sestina', in Drusilla Modjeska, (ed) *Inner Cities*, Penguin, Melbourne 1989, p. 16

² Mrs McIndoe, interviewed 20 September 1984 for Melbourne's Living Museum of the West, Archives

³ Modjeska, *Inner Cities*, p. 67

My attachment? First it's to houses. The big weatherboard house in Campsie which we sold and was knocked down to put up units. [No], it's not even the house, I think it's actually the back yard. And the flowers in the back hard that I'm attached to. So it's bluebells and snowdrops.⁴

And what does a place mean to us? I'm going to discuss four places, two in Western Australia, one in Adelaide and one in New South Wales. Each time I'll be asking, not so much how did the individuals respond to their home, however they identified it, but how did they communicate their feelings about it. What I've read so far are words, heartfelt words, certainly, but still only words. Yet people respond to the home that affects them most deeply in many different ways intuitively, beyond words, and it's these non-verbal responses that are my focus today. That's my question. How do people communicate their deepest feelings about their home *outside* the spoken and the written word?

At Augusta, Western Australia, a plaque erected to John Molloy in 1930 reads:

On this site stood the house of Captain John Molloy. He was one of a band of settlers at Augusta in 1830 and was appointed first Government Superintendent at the Settlement on the 1st of July 1830.

Underneath the ornate fixture is a smaller and much more modern plaque:

Homesite of Georgiana Molloy 1830-1839, Pioneer Botanist, Augusta and the Vasse.

Georgiana's plaque – she was John's wife - was added pretty clearly some time after the plaque to John, at a time when at last historical societies were overcoming their 'first man' obsession and beginning to recognise women whose achievements sometimes outmatched those of their husbands. Here Georgiana was certainly the more important of the two in revealing to us how much the country meant to her. She told us with words and without words. Indeed, as her soul began little by little to embrace the bush at Augusta and the Vasse, her words were powerful enough. She wrote of her excursions:

Being in the bush is to me one of the most delightful states of existence, free from every household care, my husband and children, all I possess on earth, about me.

I'm following, though, her response to the land beyond words, in the seeds and cuttings which she collected with loving care and despatched to her botanical friends overseas. Her intuitive, non-verbal response was to the native flora. We can now see those seeds and pressings not as simply as an exercise in take-and-exploit but as a two-way response, an interaction between herself and the land which had earlier seemed so harsh and alien. The historian Maggie

⁴ Trish Gillard, 23 September 1995, interviewed by the author

MacKellar wrote of Georgiana in her recent book, *Core of My Heart My Country*:

The bush had given Georgiana the opportunity to experience an expansion of her identity. Through her collecting she had stepped off the veranda and entered the land. Her eyes, which had been trained by observing her garden, were opened to the cycles of the seasons. Her interest in botany gave her the opportunity to explore the land on her terms, within an order that reflected her upbringing and her culture. Her collecting was an attempt to conceive of the land within a system of knowledge that was familiar to her, to know it and to name it. Her curiosity to classify became an artistic response to the new land. Her grief at the loss of her son taught her that refuge could be found in a place that had only represented loneliness, difference and isolation. Finally, her collecting produced a sense of place in the new land, an expansion of herself that was articulated through her longing to 'be' in the bush.⁵

Let's shift to the enspirited landscape of New Norcia.

The Spanish Benedictines, with a fine eye for symmetry, built their monastic retreat of local stone and wood, dark brown on white. To the east still roll the distant slopes of New Norcia's huge estates, to the west the hills rise more sharply. The regular bell of the church reminds visitors that the life of the monks continues in the manner required by Saint Benedict for fourteen centuries. It invites them to participate in each of the seven daily offices in the chapel which divide the day into work, prayer and leisure.

Many are the distractions from a life of contemplation. The monk who finds it most difficult to find mental space is the Chief Executive, the Abbot. Placid Spearritt. Coming to New Norcia twenty years ago, he became the Abbot in 1997. For twenty five years previously he lived in a Yorkshire monastery.

How does Abbot Placid relate to this powerful landscape? He tells me that ideally the natural world will be the trigger. In Yorkshire he drew upon the beech trees and oaks, in Spain, the rolling hills and clumped forests. In Switzerland the Alps were 'on fire with red light'. Australia was different: *there's always something special about the country you're born and bred in.*

Placid Spearritt, like Georgiana Molloy, takes the land as inspiration. By the side of the creek in the monks' private quarters, and without his shirt, brings him most readily to embrace what he calls the great silence of the universe. When I ask Placid if he is prepared to share with me his sense of place, he asks me to return at five pm for his period of spiritual retreat.

Now the heat of the day has passed, the western sun is casting long shadows but the first cool breezes of evening have not yet touched the drying creek or

⁵ Maggie MacKellar. *Cote of My Heart My Country*, MUP, Carlton, 2004, p.60

the golden air. This is a time for contemplation rather than the invocation of the spirits of the landscape, for observation, for making connections.

Just before five each afternoon, Placid Spearritt walks from the monastery to one of several sites on the creek to begin the daily period of contemplation required by St Benedict. We come to the track which follows the creek behind the monastery. Though the shadows are lengthening, the heat and light are still intense. We pause at what seems to be nowhere in particular. What Placid tries to do here, he explains, is to use this landscape to set his mind to rest, a daily half hour to stop trying to change the world, to absorb the unlimited sky in which clouds can be clouds. Let the play of light illuminate the horizon as it is meant to do. Absorb that light and heat. Look up, then down and through the physical world. Unwind the mind. Hold that pepperina, complete in itself. That dark green olive tree, rustling almost imperceptibly in the evening calm. *I can look at that for fifteen minutes.* We stop beside two dead trees, ragged, asymmetrical, *just beautiful, an object lesson in unity and diversity. Look at the galahs, they'll sit on those trees for hours. That's another lesson for me in patience. I cease to exist separately from reality.*

We pause at another site of contemplation: the brown road, the drying creek, a couple of dead trees. *It's not the site, it's the view I get from here.* Placid points to the precise direction. There in my photograph he stands, white habit, black belt, sharp shadow, in calm contemplation: the brown and gravelled road, thirty metres of brown grass and bushes, white stones of the creek, taller darker gums, dead grey limbs, upward sloping yellowish cleared paddocks of the middle distance, counterpointed clearing and bush, finite to infinite, wispy white clouds seeming to cling to the distant horizon, lighter now but above and over the blue and ever more blue of the unplumbed sky. We stand not at a site but a line of vision capable of releasing the mind to deep contemplation. It's an angle, a track like a journey of a located Dreamtime creator.

The wind is in the trees; the river is flowing; movement stirs within the infinite which begins at the ordinariness of the gum trees and galahs, New Norcia and the creek, heat and yellow haze, towards Australian skies, an Australian sun on his back. At the end of the line of sight is infinity.⁶

Now we are in Blackwood, a suburb of Adelaide, to meet a different and complex set of meanings about an institutional home: the Colebrook Home for Aboriginal Girls. This institution was a Stolen Generations Home for removed Indigenous children, whose most distinguished inmate was Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue. The home is gone now, almost nothing remains of its physicality but the grounds in which it stood. Yet the site today is neither ruin nor empty space. Rather it has been re-created as a sculpture garden.

Entering, the visitor encounters a life-size bronze sculpture of a grieving mother. The mind falls to contemplation. Set beside group photographs of the

⁶ For development of this theme among the New Norcia monks, see P. Read, *Haunted Earth*, University of NSW Press, Kensington 2003, ch. 10

children, the path leads to a fountain suggesting, in the dry and dusty atmosphere, an oasis. A tiny bronze frog alights atop a granite rock. In another granite piece are carved a print of a bare foot, and beside it, a high heel shoe. The journey of the visitor, and the inmate proceeds. But towards what? And by what symbols and words have the Colebrook girls reinscribed upon this landscape of pain, new meanings of reconciliation and forgiveness?

A plaque invites the visitor to meditate upon a mother's grief:

*And every morning as the sun came up the whole family would wail.
They did that for 32 years until they saw me again. Who can imagine
what a mother went through?
But you have to learn to forgive.*

A second re-orientates us to the children. The Nunga elder Doris Kartinyeri writes:

*We are the stolen children who were taken away
torn from our mother's breasts.
What can a child do?
Where can a child turn?
Where s the guiding hand
A child is meant to have?*

The path winds through shadows and light spaces, more photographs of the inmates, seats, places of reflection, plaques inscribed in bronze whose texts grown more complex:

*Colebrook Home began with the United Aborigines' Mission in 1924 in
Dunjiba (Oodnadatta). Then in 1927 it was transferred to Quorn in the
Flinders ranges, with 12 children cared for by sister Ruby Hyde and
Sister Della Rutter. In 1943 they moved here to Eden Hills.*

Only 'many' of the children? Outsiders perhaps would imagine that all of them were victims of forced assimilation. It is the inmates themselves, not historians, who are inviting our reassessment of the site. The second paragraph reads:

*Sisters Hyde and Rutter were each awarded an MBE for their unselfish
devotion. They left in 1952 to establish Tenderra Hostel, and the
succession of superintendents who followed them at Colebrook home
enforced a strict discipline. Many of the children had been removed
from their families under the government's policy of assimilation, some
never to see their parents again.*

Again the participants, those who underwent the trauma, are those who separate the good child carers from the bad. Most outsiders, perhaps, would initially condemn all the staff. Yet the visitor has already received a signpost:

But you have to learn to forgive.

The land here holds many meanings for the Colebrook residents: perhaps horror, perhaps hatred, but certainly sadness, trauma and distress; and a new commitment to forgiveness. But despite the fact that this is their place, and their monument, memories, photographs, sculptures and plaques, there is also a clear place here for the visitor who becomes at once an observer-participant. Another plaque begins:

*Hearts break, tears fall, fear cried out
from the wretched hands and arms of a mother and child separated*

and then shifts to sharing the emotions with the visitor:

Feel the pain, touch the ache, caress the tears.

At this point the re-inscription of the site is complete. Their words are meant literally. Caress the sculpture of the mother, touch that little frog, put your feet into the shoeprints, wet your hand in the pool of tears. Marvel at the intellectual and emotional complexity of the Colebrook women who have metamorphosed a landscape of pain and separation to one also of forgiveness.

At length the visitor leaves Colebrook memorial garden, to read with new understanding the invocation:

*Let everyone who comes to this place know
they are on Aboriginal land
the site of what was once Colebrook
Training Home where,
between 1943 and 1972,
some 350 Aboriginal children lived,
isolated from their families and the beloved
land of their ancestors.*

*This is part of the country of the Kurna
people whose heritage and presence
continues today.*

The site is no longer *only* Kurna country, it is *also* the country of the Colebrook children. Their life on that site, the trauma they suffered, has made it so. Their re-engagement with the site has changed it a third time: Kurna and Colebrook: and forgiveness.

The last story is the saddest of all. It's a story of Adaminaby, in southern New South Wales, a town deeply loved in a rough and understated kind of way. In 1957 Adaminaby was inundated by the waters of the Snowy Mountains Scheme. The point of the story is not so much to follow the destruction of their town itself, but to explore what happens when people are prevented from expressing their feelings about their loved places. Not in words, not in

monuments, not even in artefacts. In the end, grief will ooze out despite its repression and legal restriction, and then it seems to be all the sadder. Our journey, then, continues from person to people as we reflect upon the strength of collective emotions focussed on a single town, and the consequences of stifling those emotions. While the Colebrook girls invite outsiders emotionally to share their site, the citizens of Adaminaby, unable to mourn the loss of their town publicly, have devised their own memorials. Intuitively they write without words their own inscriptions, they conduct their own rituals.

Just before the advent of family motoring, Adaminaby, a little town in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales, was almost as remote from the rest of Australia as it had been half a century earlier. Seven or eight farm gates had to be opened and shut between Adaminaby and the nearest town 15 km away. But Adaminaby was peaceful and self-sufficient. One- to three-hectare farms were common on which the residents kept geese, a hayfield or a cow. A barter economy and larger farms kept many families out of debt even without regular employment. On the famous, roistering Saturday nights, stores remained open till 8.30.⁷

It was 1949 when Leo Crowe, who owned land near Adaminaby, pulled up his horse to ask a stranger what he was staring at through his binoculars. *That's where they're going to put the dam.* Others were as incredulous as Leo as they heard the news that the Snowy Mountains authority intended to flood the Eucumbene valley to produce hydro-electric power. The townsfolk were shown a marked post to indicate the proposed high water mark, and assured that everyone would have to leave. The whole valley was to be flooded. The town would cease to exist.

The Snowy Mountains Authority made much of the New Adaminaby which would replace the old town. For the first time residents would enjoy mains electricity, running water and sewerage. Wooden houses which were capable of being moved would be trucked to the new town site while public buildings like churches and banks would either be moved or rebuilt. The massive public relations exercise implied that those who stood in the way of national progress were selfish or unpatriotic.

And so they moved to the new town.

People don't remember coming to the new town - they remember leaving the old. And in the wet spring of 1956, roads turn to mud as residents stare at their neighbour's house grinding past the front door, then at the empty site. Soon a second space appears on the other side. The diminishing village begins to resemble the open valley slope it had been a century earlier. One by one the shops close, some to reappear in the new town ten kilometres away, some to vanish altogether. The post office closes in September. 'New Adaminaby' becomes Adaminaby' and 'Old Adaminaby' ceases to exist. The last house is

⁷ For a longer discussion on the psychological consequences of the destruction of towns for the inhabitants, see P. Read, *Returning to Nothing*, CUP, Melbourne, 1996, ch 4

jacked up in November. An Authority publicity photograph records the triumph of the cottage perched atop the semi-trailer, but the background inadvertently reveals the agony of a dying town: empty footpaths, collapsing verandas, naked interiors, piles of debris, exposed ceilings.

By December 1957 the water is rising at the dam wall by 30 cm a day. The farms and orchards along the river are already gone and the water is creeping towards the town site itself. All that remains are outhouses, foundations, chimneys, immovable stone cottages, roads and trees. Lanes, dusty for a century, are tinged with green. Fruit trees have their best, but briefest, season. The last balls, churches services, dances and picnics are over. People dig roses out of the gardens for their new dwellings. They calculate the height of the water by watching it rise up the pine trees at the back of the recreation ground. All at once the pines die. The fruit trees, too, die before they vanish. Among the sharpest memories are those of frequently returning to the water's edge to stare at what will soon be nothing. The evicted residents stand in fascination, dismay, anguish or horror before the scummy water inching towards what remains of their homes. Look: it's lapping at the back fence, creeping up the garden, swirling round the outhouse, it's wetting the door sill, it's muddying the fireplace, it's eddying about the lintel, it's splashing about the chimneys. Oblivion.

The historian Paul Connerton noted that sometimes community memory is a struggle against state power and forced forgetting.⁸ So at Adaminaby. The Hydro Electric authorities did their best to eliminate memories of the old town. They tried, unsuccessfully, to change the name of the new town to Chifley, and the old town to Coolawye, as if memories were scheduled to vanish along with the names. That, perhaps, was the one victory of the townsfolk.

In interviews the mood of the residents of Old Adaminaby was mostly of disappointed or sad resignation: *Mixed feelings now, a bit of sadness or I don't know how to explain, it's just that we were happy there and satisfied to stay put.* Many remain distressed or in emotional paralysis because they were not allowed to mourn their town. Forty years after its destruction, there were still very few picnics beside the old town, or pilgrimages, or heritage walks, no wreaths floating, no museum, no map, not a solitary sign beside the scattered half-dozen houses and the silent lake. This is not the slow peaceful decline of other country towns.

And yet the former inhabitants still express their sorrow in actions and artefacts. Some refuse to return to the site: that's a determined response. When, in 1983, during the worst drought since the dam was filled, the water level dropped so far that those who used to live in the higher part of the town saw the foundations of their houses reappear, *like a corpse from a grave*, as one resident put it. Their responses were not at all like the Colebrook girls who were allowed the freedom, in words and symbols, to reassess their own site of pain. They are, though, a little like Georgiana Molloy's: people picked flowers

⁸ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, CUP Cambridge, 1989, p. 15

from bulbs growing in the same beds where they had bloomed a generation earlier and arranged them in their new homes. And they are a little like Placid Spearritt's: they knelt in prayer in the ruins of the church, picnicked in their former gardens, or were photographed standing on the muddy steps of what were once their front doors.

In these intuitive ways the Adaminaby residents communicated their feelings for their homes and the town and the land which they had lost. At the conclusion of the twenty interviews I conducted with former residents I often read a verse from a poem written by a resident of a nearby pastoral property:

*The stations, farms, the sheds, the barns
Are all awash in the deep waters.
While ghosts of men swim through the glen
Drowned faces haunt their sons and daughters.⁹*

Hearing these words the old residents would whisper to me, 'That's it. That's it exactly'. The Australian poet Douglas Stewart urged us to mourn another drowned Snowy Mountains town, Jindabyne, in terms equally appropriate for Augusta, New Norcia and Colebrook:

*Finally for the mystery and the pathos
That seep from earth and bubble out from water
In any place where men have lived and bred
And feuded with each other.¹⁰*

And I think of those words too as I stand at the deserted site of old Adaminaby, on a still, cloudless day in mid summer, a slight chill in the air, as the potholed road slips into the silent, glittering lake. Or at the site of a former home, where, on a foundation stone, the owner has gathered together and arranged some tiny pieces of broken cutlery and crockery. Strange and stranded objects, they are in their own way an artistic response to the land as powerful as Georgiana Molloy's.

Gathering seeds was Georgiana's artistic response to her home. Touching the infinite is Placid Spearritt's. The Colebrook girls, in registering their emotions invite outsiders to share their complex feelings for a lost home. The Old Adaminaby townsfolk express their intuitive grief in their own private rituals every time, in time of drought, the waters of the lake recede.

Let's acknowledge the fact that attachment to a place – to a home – is one of the strongest of all human emotions. Let's applaud the capacity of people like the Colebrook women to re-inscribe, over many years, the meaning of home from a site of pain to one of forgiveness. And if, inevitably, people must lose their homes before the construction of a freeway, let's not force them into a lifetime's silence and grief. For feelings about home will continue to emerge, sooner or later, in words, actions, artefacts and intuitions which sometimes lie too deep for tears.

⁹ Marge Mackay, 'Adaminaby The Old Town', ms

¹⁰ Douglas Stewart, 'Farewell to Jindabyne', in D. Stewart., *Collected Poems 1936-1967*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1967, p. 28