

**Unreliable Narrators Tell Unreachable Story:
*Writing Preservation***

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Statement of Authorship

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17 May 2021

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Abstract

The author's position in writing historical fiction is integral to the work of fiction itself: no matter the extent of historical research, an array of choices, both conscious and unconscious, will shape the novel in accordance with the author's social and philosophical standing.

My novel *Preservation*, which occupies 80% of this paper, concerns the 1797 wreck of the *Sydney Cove* in Bass Strait, and the trek undertaken by survivors along the southern coast of New South Wales, seeking salvation in Sydney. It involves a re-imagining of the Furneaux Islands, the southern NSW coast, and early Sydney itself, along with the fictional 'fleshing-out' of characters who otherwise only appear historically as disembodied names.

The critical component, comprising 20% of this paper, examines the preconceptions I took into the writing task, and how they shaped the work.

The lens of landscape, in particular, may reveal hidden influences in history-telling. I tried to reimagine a landscape that is fundamentally altered and can only be summoned by harnessing imagination to research, and interacting physically with place. This critical component considers writers who have engaged with the Australian landscape by incorporating their own physical experience into the work. Inescapably, such efforts entangle the writer in the thicket of their own impressions. The self becomes the centre.

I discuss a range of Australian historical fiction authors, and consider the concept of 'psychogeography' as it applies to landscape writing: from Robert Etheridge's early monograph on inscribed trees to Sarah Murgatroyd's re-telling of the Burke and Wills mythology. I examine the choices of character in *Preservation*, and the differing ways in which historical narratives appear in Aboriginal story-telling, in particular referencing limitations of the English language in conveying concepts that were developed without writing, or even English words, in mind.

Please note that the creative component of this thesis, which is comprised of the novel *Preservation*, has been removed from this document for copyright reasons.

Preservation (ISBN 9781925773125) by Jock Serong was published by the Text Publishing Company of Level 26, Royal Bank Chambers, 287 Collins St Melbourne, Victoria on 29 October 2018, and is available for retail purchase and library loan throughout Australasia.

CRITICAL COMPONENT

Introduction

Novels arrive in various guises: as flashes of character or scene, as delicate narrative haikus or syllogisms, or even as entire arcs of story that demand to be written down. *Preservation* was a story that I had carried in my head for decades: one that was told to me by older residents of the Furneaux Group in eastern Bass Strait in fragments and differing versions over many years. I rolled the story around in my mind, forgot it for years at a time and then heard it again. I re-told it to others, and in doing so I became an unconscious agent of the story's evolutionary change. Each time the story reappeared – each time I took it out and dusted it off for some conversational or creative purpose – its boundaries shifted in tiny ways until I was no longer sure of its dependability.

In late 2016, perhaps in response to that sense of uncertainty, I began the early sketches of a novel built upon what is known of the 1797 wreck of the *Sydney Cove*. I wanted to explore the entire landscape of this strange and half-forgotten tale, until I knew every corner and could confidently fill the darkened glades with fiction.

But like a painter working from a photograph, I was trapped in two dimensions and struggling to create the illusion of depth. I began back-filling the verifiable parts of the tale with my imaginings, and in doing so I started from the notion that the archive – in this case a handful of primary documents and the artefacts of a shipwreck – tells the truth, and that there is a single truth to be found. In hindsight it may be easy to point out that an archive is a product of its makers, and that it tells *their* truths. Jacques Derrida pointed out the implied exclusivity in the linguistic origin of the term 'archive':

...its only meaning comes... from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded... It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place.¹

Each house, each archive, will tell a story, but they will be stories under what Derrida calls 'house arrest': limited by the selections and motivations that in each instance created the archive in the first place. But this aspect of archives – the sense in which they are far from magisterial, and should never be taken to house incontestable truths – was something I had to discover for myself.

That critical examination of archivally-based writing is one strand of this essay. The other concerns a second belief, or perhaps illusion, that I had to confront in writing *Preservation*. This was my belief that I could efface myself from the process; that my marionettes would do the dramatic work so convincingly that the reader would forget the operative hands. It turned out neither assumption could withstand scrutiny: the archive might be an identifiable monolith, but the rock is sedimentary. It is made from accumulated layers of interpretation and judgment that have solidified under the weight of the ones later accreted. What I write about this story must inevitably add a layer. It too will solidify over time and in some incremental fashion it will contribute to future assumptions about the truth. And so too, out from behind the characters, I would become visible and exposed.

I want to examine how I positioned myself in my own storytelling: how I found a fictional tale to tell within the scraps and fragments of archival material, how I navigated my own biases and the biases of the material I was assimilating, and ultimately how I came to terms with a maddening sense of imperfection. I went back to the past, planning to replicate it as accurately I could for a contemporary reader, but I returned with something different: something barely recognisable to me. To explain what it was, I need to sift through the complex set of influences that shaped *Preservation*.

¹ J. Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', in *Diacritics*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p.2

Re-floating the *Sydney Cove*: the Emergence of *Preservation*

Until I began to research *Preservation*, I had not studied history and I did not in any way considered myself a writer of historical fiction. I was simply drawn to a particular story I had become aware of through my long association with Flinders Island, the largest in the Furneaux Group.

Two works of non-fiction by two highly-regarded Australian historians had informed my understanding of the *Sydney Cove* story.² The first, Michael Nash's *Sydney Cove*, told the story primarily through the lens of artefacts: the exquisitely delicate conservation work done by divers and scientists on the wreck site and its contents. In Mark McKenna's *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories*, the story is one of four essays about places on the Australian coast where history has been 'lost' over time. In doing so, his narrative is mostly documentary. The two approaches dovetail to form a detailed chronicle of misadventure and discovery.

The fundamental elements of the tale – a doomed voyage, a shipwreck, an arduous journey, all of it emerging from patchy documentary sources over two centuries old – set my novel on a predetermined course before I had even begun the conscious selections of character, voice and setting that would make it into a novel. Had those basic elements amounted in my mind to a crime story, the novel would have been a crime novel. Indeed, a writer with a stronger grasp of the genre may have marshalled the elements into a whodunnit. But I am not that writer. It was, for me, a shipwreck story, and more importantly a story of early engagements between 'Europeans' (acknowledging that their Lascar labourers were not Europeans at all, but South Asian indentured workers of multiple nationalities) and Aboriginal people. As a result, the story announced itself to me as history.

Every time I was asked about what I was writing about, every time I spoke in a bookshop or a library or at a festival, with every interview I gave I built up a performative version of what happened to the *Sydney Cove*: a short synopsis of the story that had colour and movement and drama. And in doing so, I was making myself a part of an ecosystem that sustained and expanded upon the 'evidentiary' version. My story goes like this:

The *Sydney Cove* was a second-hand coastal trader, previously called the *Begum Shaw*,³ which was re-fitted and renamed in 1796 by the trading company Campbell & Clark to sail a speculative cargo

² M. McKenna, *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories*, Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press 2016, and M. Nash, *Sydney Cove: The History and Archaeology of an Eighteenth-Century Shipwreck*, Hobart, Navarine Publishing 2009.

³ S. Strachan, 'History and Archaeology of the Sydney Cove Shipwreck (1797)', *Occasional Papers in Prehistory* 5, Research School of Pacific Studies, Canberra, Australian National University, 1986, pp.97-8, cited in M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.35.

of luxury goods, including a vast shipment of rum, from Calcutta to the fledgling colony at Sydney. The ship never reached her intended destination. Two primary sources provide the evidence of her demise: one is the vessel's wreck, located on a sandbank in approximately five metres of water off Preservation Island, which is itself situated off the southwest corner of Cape Barren Island in eastern Bass Strait. The other source is the transcribed diary of one of the survivors of that wreck, William Clark, the vessel's supercargo, published in an Indian newspaper called the *Asiatic Mirror*.⁴ The emergence of a survivor's diary after a shipwreck may not in itself be an unusual feature. But here the physical diary has, tantalisingly, vanished. All that remains is this transcription, and along with it, questions about provenance, timing and motive. It is a palimpsest and therefore cannot quite be trusted.

The context of this voyage and the nature of the cargo reveal much about prevailing trade conditions at the turn of the nineteenth century. Firstly, sending speculative cargoes of liquor and other non-essentials from Calcutta to the colonies was a way of circumventing the East India Company's stranglehold on trade out of Europe.⁵ It was no accident that Scottish trading houses such as Campbell & Clark had based their operations outside the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, the cargo of spirits must be considered for its economic importance. Although there would be a ready recreational market in the colony (at that stage numbering about 3,000 people),⁶ the greater importance of all those bottles and casks lay in their use for bartering as there was no minted currency in the colony at the time.⁷ Real and personal property, including the services of convicts, could be procured using alcohol as currency.

After departing Calcutta in November 1796, the ill-suited boat fared badly across the Indian Ocean. I imagined the hull, slimy with the mud of the Hooghly River, beginning to fail almost immediately. By the time she rounded the southern tip of Tasmania 12 weeks later, the *Sydney Cove* was in a ruinous state; Lascars dying of exhaustion at the pumps and the second mate Leisham falling from the rigging to his death.⁸ Here, I could summon storytelling structures as basic as fairy tales: the

⁴ F.M. Bladen, (ed.) *Narrative of the Shipwreck of Captain Hamilton and the crew of the Sydney Cove*, in *Asiatic Mirror*, Calcutta [1797-8]. Gutenberg.com, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1300541h.html> (accessed 6 February 2017).

⁵ M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.27.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data puts the population of Sydney the previous year at 2936. *Australian Historical Population Statistics, 2006* [website] <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3105.0.65.0012006>, (accessed 11 February 2021).

⁷ Reserve Bank of Australia, 'Before Federation: To 1900' (unattributed) Reserve Bank of Australia Museum [website], <https://museum.rba.gov.au/exhibitions/displays/before-federation/> accessed 11 February 2021.

⁸ Sometimes referred to as 'Leishman': see for example Naval Historical Society of Australia, 'The *Sydney Cove* and Her Impact on Early Colonial Exploration' [website] (attributed as 'editorial staff'), <https://www.navyhistory.org.au/the-sydney-cove-and-her-impact-on-early-colonial-exploration/> (accessed 11

arrogance of the traders, the cruelty of the sea, the poor and powerless bearing the brunt of powerful people's mistakes.

Signal images of suffering and confusion multiply in the final days of the voyage, ones that would inform my fiction throughout the novel project. The *Sydney Cove* was carrying livestock: at least a bullock and probably other animals.⁹ Wedged below decks, I imagined their agonies as the hull filled with water, their panic and futile kicking. And what of the Lascars who continued to operate the torturous pump handle after watching their shipmates collapse and die of exhaustion in the effort?

A central line of inquiry began to emerge: for these harrowed survivors, was there time or opportunity to appreciate the extraordinary beauty of the archipelago they were seeing for the first time having travelled from India and Europe – the huge, gleaming domes of granite, the sheer mountain faces and white quartzite beaches? Or did survival preclude all higher thought by this stage?

Clues about personality and purpose begin to appear through time's fog, and now I could apportion characters to historical figures with something approaching confidence. Beached off tiny Preservation Island in the Furneaux Group, the remaining 49 souls aboard made landfall without further loss of life. The captain, Guy Hamilton, named the island 'Preservation' in recognition of its role in saving them. It struck me as an act of humility, choosing to name the island in honour of something providential, rather than oneself. I thought Hamilton was unsentimental, too: he named the nearby islet he used to separate the booze from the men 'Rum Island'. Only a short strait of water off the island, a utilitarian marker for other mariners, bears the captain's name, and there is no evidence that 'Hamilton Roads' was even named by him.¹⁰

February 2021). F.M. Bladen, *Narrative*: "In handing the topsails, Mr Leishman, second mate, was lost from the main topsail yard-arm." Also Archives Office of New South Wales, Ships Protests of Bills 1792-1815, Judge Advocate's Office, Ref 5/1162 pp.64-73, in M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.229: "...we lost Mr Leishman from the Main Top Sail Yard Arm..."

⁹ M.Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.39.

¹⁰ Australian Hydrographic Service, Canberra, Nautical Chart AUS 487 Bass Strait (2005).



Fig. 1: View from landing site at Preservation Island, across location of *Sydney Cove* wreck, to Rum Island (author photo).

The practical difficulty of their situation soon dawned on the survivors: nobody back in Calcutta could be aware they had foundered, no-one in Sydney knew they were coming and no shipping ever ventured as far west as they had wound up. Existing charts made only a vague (and inaccurate) reference to the 'Furneaux Isles'.¹¹ The chart of the eastern Australian coastline made by Captain James Cook in 1770 began at approximately Point Hicks. In between was sheer guesswork: a strait? A deep bay? An estuary?¹²

Again, as a writer I sensed opportunity. What a perfect conundrum! Had there been an expected arrival date in Sydney for the ship and its cargo, then a search party would have been dispatched when they became late. That's no backbone for a survival epic. But with literary flair, the protagonists had snookered themselves magnificently - no news at origin or destination, and a cartographical vanishing act:

¹¹(1777) National Library Australia: Bib ID 1825887, in M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, pp.46-7

¹²(1773) National Library of Australia, nla.map-t325-v, in M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.65

Deep in the clean white paper west of the known coast, we were far from any passing ship. No-one could know of our plight. There was no prospect of rescue. We had vanished from the face of the earth.¹³

The only solution was for the sailors to rescue themselves. If some of the company sailed the ship's small longboat the rest of the way to Sydney they could raise a return mission for those left behind. It was a journey of around 500 nautical miles: in favourable conditions they thought it would take them two weeks.¹⁴

A crew of 17 men were selected to set off on the longboat, which was to be commanded by Hugh Thompson, the *Sydney Cove's* first mate. Also on board was the supercargo, William Clark, who was a nephew of one of the founders of the shipping company, Campbell & Clark, who were the owners of the stricken vessel.¹⁵ It may be speculated that he was placed among the longboat crew, rather than staying on Preservation Island with the salvaged cargo for which he was responsible, because he might have commercial sway with authorities in Sydney. That influence might mean the difference between Sydney sending a mission purely to rescue sailors, and sending one that could begin the salvage of the all-important cargo: the quantity of alcohol on board the vessel amounted to 7500 gallons, or around 31,000 litres, comprising rum, wine, brandy, madeira, gin, beer and other liquor.¹⁶ For all practical purposes, this cargo may as well have been bullion.

Other than Thomson, Clark and the ship's carpenter, a man likely to have been called Bennet, the balance of the crew was made up of Lascars – indentured Bengalis, Javanese and men of other south Asian nationalities.¹⁷ Indeed, the original complement of the *Sydney Cove* may have comprised as many as 44 Lascars: who formed the backbone of English commercial shipping at the time.¹⁸

¹³ *Preservation*, Text Publishing p.39 / this document p.29. Page references for *Preservation* herein are given for the published novel – Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2018, and for the creative component in this document.

¹⁴ M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, p.18.

¹⁵ A brief account of the longboat voyage forms part of William Clark's diary: Historical Records of NSW, (HRNSW) Volume 3, 'Voyage of the *Sydney Cove's* Longboat', p.760. M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.36.

¹⁶ M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.39. No cargo manifest has been found, but the amount of alcohol is calculated by archaeological evidence of casks and bottles.

¹⁷ Depictions of Lascars in *Preservation* are based upon A. Jaffers, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny*, Woodbridge, Boydell Press 2015. Pp.3-8 of Jaffers' book provide a survey of published works on Lascars. See also R. Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947*, London, Pluto Press 1986; M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, p.217 n.10 also cites J.J. Ewald, 'Crosses of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen and Other Migrants in the Northwest Indian Ocean c.1750-1914', in Washington, *American Historical Review*, February 2000. Interactions between Aboriginal Australians and Lascars, among other south Asians, are covered in H. Goodall, D. Ghosh and L.R. Todd, 'Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire: Indians, Aborigines and Australians across the Indian Ocean', in Broadway, *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol. 3 No 1, February 2008. <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/TfC>, (accessed 29 October 2019).

¹⁸ Jaffers' *Lascars*, p.3 estimate of Lascars at sea on British vessels in 1855 at 10,000-12,000 people.

After wrecking the longboat two days into their voyage – somewhere near present day Lake's Entrance¹⁹ – the men began an epic trek along the coast to reach Sydney. Some 76 days later, only three of the party of 17 reached their goal, or at least got close enough to Sydney that they were rescued by a fishing boat at what is now Wattamolla Bay, north of Wollongong.

Clark was one of those three. Another was the carpenter, Bennet. The third was Clark's Lascar 'boy', or manservant. Clark uses the term 'boy' in his diary (allowing for the possibility that it is an emendation by the transcriber, Bladen), and I thought it apt to mislead: was the Lascar 10 years old, or 15, or was any Lascar retained in the capacity of manservant identified that way, regardless of age? I could find no hard evidence, so I struck a reluctant compromise in my version of the story: he would be in his mid-teens, his exact age indeterminate.

Interestingly, there is no mention of Clark's diary in accounts of the *Sydney Cove* incident to be found in Sydney records from the time.²⁰ Its existence is only evidenced by a later piece in a Calcutta newspaper, *Asiatic Mirror*, which in late 1797 and early 1798 published a purported transcription of it.²¹ No explanation is given in the *Asiatic Mirror* regarding the fate of the original document. More significantly, the account also gives little indication of the fates of the 14 men who failed to reach Sydney. It is in this lacuna that room is created for fiction to take over.

My self-deception about the story's simplicity – and the apparently low risks of telling it – began with my first steps into the narrative. If I took the established set of facts that I have just outlined and interpolated scenes and motives into the absences using the extant historical evidence as a source for probable inferences, I could attribute human traits to people who lived and died two centuries ago. It is known that 14 of the 17 *Sydney Cove* walkers did not reach Sydney. I could infer that they died in the bush (they may not have), that the absence of any explanation for their loss in Clark's journal points to his complicity in their deaths or disappearances (this is merely one of several explanations) and that the lost men and the survivors' wounds pointed to discord within the party, and between the party and the Yuin peoples (again, one of several possibilities).

¹⁹ This estimate is Mark McKenna's: "They had landed forty to fifty kilometres south-west of Lakes Entrance, in the territory of the Gunai Kurnai." M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, p.19.

²⁰ Captain G. Hamilton, *Notice – Sydney Cove – Ship*, in *Ship's Protests of Bills 1792-1815*, Judge Advocate's Office of New South Wales, Ref 5/1162 (4 July 1797) pp.64-73; G. Hamilton, correspondence to Gov. J. Hunter (undated) in M. Nash, *Sydney Cove* p.232; Gov. J. Hunter, correspondence to Sir J. Banks, 15 August 1797.

²¹ The exact provenance of this document is unknown. The full title provided on the Gutenberg.com reproduction of the document is as follows: "NARRATIVE OF THE SHIPWRECK OF CAPTAIN HAMILTON AND THE CREW OF THE SYDNEY COVE. By Asiatic Mirror, Calcutta [1797-8]. FROM: HISTORICAL RECORDS OF NEW SOUTH WALES. VOLUME III—HUNTER. 1796-1799. [APPENDIX A, pages 757-769.] EDITED BY F. M. BLADEN, BARRISTER-AT-LAW."

There may have been faint alarm bells ringing as I set out on the task, but I did not hear them.

Feeling the Landscape – The Murgatroyd Method

The landscape, however, did give me trouble. I am a Victorian, a settler inhabitant of the cold and exposed Southern Ocean coast. Tall forests, delicate cycad understoreys and melodious nesting birds are not my world, so I drove to those coasts, the places where the bedraggled survivors of the *Sydney Cove* walked, places where the Gunai Kurnai and the Yuin people are and have always been present. I drove for hours, and walked in the forest and along the beach, swam in the ocean and sat dripping on the rocks and wrote in a notebook I had especially set aside from more mundane tasks like interviewing for freelance writers. I would draw in the notebook and take photos on my phone and record voice memos into it, thus creating a bank of raw material. The notebook and the phone would between them capture my every visceral reaction to the land in real time and as freshly as if it were vacuum-packed, and these would morph into the observations of my characters. By feeding the past back into the present through a series of conceptual filters – choosing pictures, aligning the notes with historical material and editing text – what I saw in 2016 and 2017 would alchemically *become* the coastline of 1797 – or so I thought.

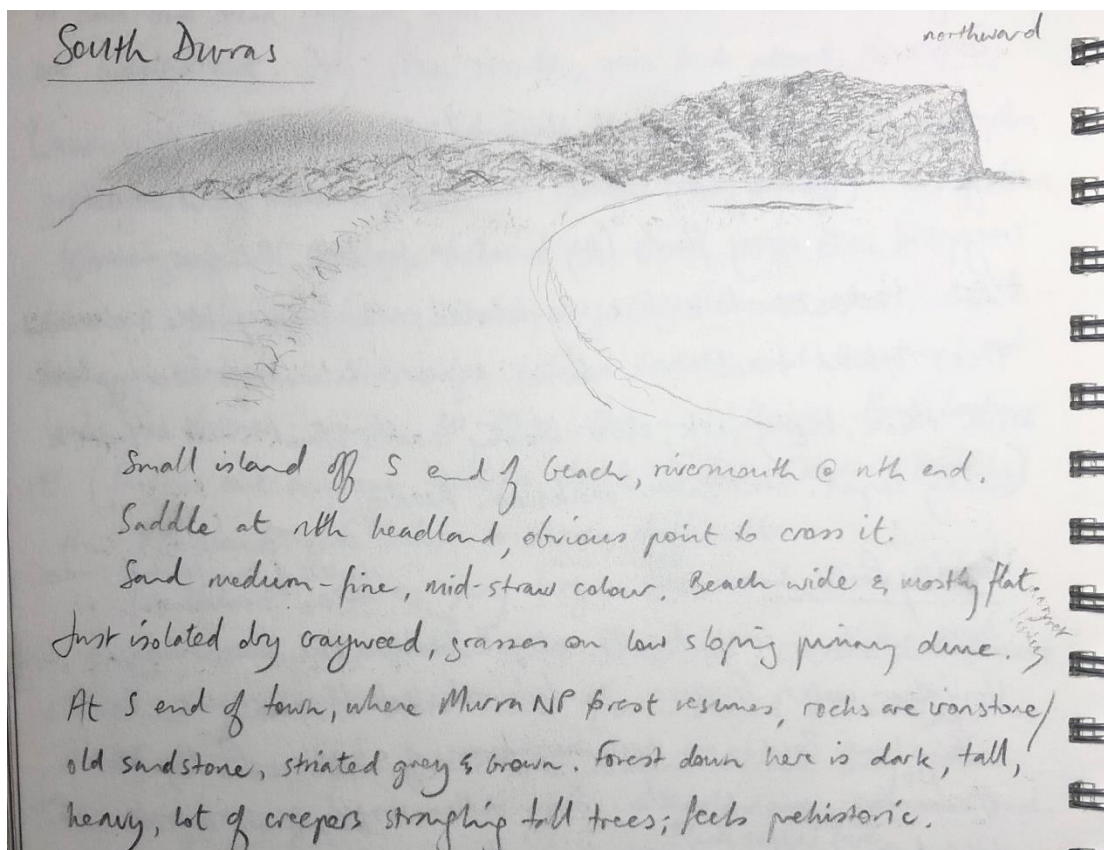


Fig. 2: Notebook entry 15 April 2017, South Durras

In adopting this method I was influenced by the powerful writing of the late Sarah Murgatroyd (1967-2002) in *The Dig Tree*,²² a narrative non-fiction re-telling of the Royal Society of Victoria expedition of 1860-61 (known colloquially as the 'Burke and Wills' expedition), which ended in disaster in what is now western Queensland. Murgatroyd made three trips into the Gulf Country and back, allowing the landscape to seep into her being so that the scholarship that underpinned her history-telling was enlivened with sensory experience:

With the flames flickering beneath the gum trees, the desert shrank. For a few brief hours the toil was over – a warm glow of security suffused the camp and shut out the vastness beyond. Only the eerie howl of the dingo reminded them of the world outside.²³

Nowhere in the explorers' scant writings do these words appear. The reader can only speculate that it was Murgatroyd reclining by a fire, retracing the ill-fated expedition and projecting herself back in time to imagine the sanctuary of the night-time camp. It was this integration of lived experience with historical records that struck me as so distinctive. Only by living in the heat and the dust, only – as she had herself laughed about – by prevailing upon her husband Kevin to "winch me out of more creeks than I deserve",²⁴ could she have fleshed out the characters and their own hardships. She met with the descendants of Aboriginal people who had cared for the expedition's last survivor, John King, at Cooper Creek.²⁵ In such tales of her research I saw Murgatroyd to be interrogating the corporeal evidence of history rather than merely reporting it. The critic Michael Cathcart called it, "a history book with all the depth of character of a historical novel."²⁶

We now know – although she made no mention of it at the time – that Murgatroyd was herself dying as she retraced the steps of the dying explorers. She carried morphine on her travels. Somehow, as the life ebbed out of her, she was engaged in a critical, time-limited exchange in which she provided a new literary perspective on one of the most hidebound legends of colonial Australia.

²² S. Murgatroyd, *The Dig Tree*, Melbourne, Text Classics, 2012.

²³ S. Murgatroyd, *The Dig Tree*, p.181.

²⁴ Epigraph to *The Dig Tree*, cited in S. Wyndham, 'Her Eyes Saw Burke and Wills Afresh', *Sydney Morning Herald* 5 April 2002. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/her-eyes-saw-burke-and-wills-afresh-20020405-gdf676.html>, (accessed 22 November 2019).

²⁵ S. Murgatroyd and P. Adams, 'Burke and Wills – The Real Story', ABC Radio Late Night Live, audio file broadcast 30 December 2002, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/burke--wills---the-real-story/3531764>, (accessed 22 November 2019).

²⁶ B. Dutter, 'Dying Writer Fulfils Last Wish in Epic of the Outback', *The Telegraph*, 9 April 2002. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1390237/Dying-writer-fulfils-last-wish-in-epic-of-outback.html> (accessed 22 November 2019).

The extremity of Murgatroyd's commitment to her story was beyond my emulation. But I could, and did, take her method as a paradigm for telling Australian history. Hers was a singular example: to *feel* the landscape, not just to research it. To write about a place and all its tiny incidents by sitting and waiting in the silence until it was absorbed into the marrow like beta particles. Perhaps, using a similar approach of the sensory informing the intellectual, I could do the reverse: namely, write a historical novel with all the evidentiary strength of a history book.

Murgatroyd's approach feels superficially similar to that of T.G.H. Strehlow (1908-1978) in writing the 1971 epic *Songs of Central Australia*, although there is a significant difference.²⁷ Both were collecting traces of a lost Australia not only through archival research but also by immersing themselves in physical terrain that was alien to them as European Australians, yet which formed the natural home of their stories. Both suffered physically in the process. But Strehlow was simultaneously living the life of a missionary at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory, and was therefore an active protagonist in the stories he told, at times fighting drought, starvation and brawling among Hermannsburg residents.²⁸ However benign or commendable his motives, he was ultimately an interventionist and a complex agent of dispossession. However obsessed she may have been by the tale of Burke and Wills and the country they crossed, Murgatroyd, by contrast, appears only as a shrewd and uninvolved observer in her writing.

There is a sleight of hand at work here, of a writer descending ever deeper into the subject matter while working consciously to efface herself from the telling. This is more than mere modesty or a repugnance at the cult of the vertical pronoun. It is a serious dedication to keeping the story and its protagonists in the foreground at all times. The reason for the physical ordeal was not simply to get closer to these people, but to bring them closer to the reader: blathering on about flat tyres and the agonies of drafting would only widen the space between character and reader. I took Murgatroyd's work as a lodestar. There would be opportunities to talk about the walking, about the method overall, after the book was released and outside of its pages. But the story was not to be diverted by self-indulgent asides.

²⁷ T.G.H. Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson 1971.

²⁸ B. Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, North Sydney, Vintage, 2002, p.320.

Von Guerard: A Landscape in Amber

My wish was to put before the public views of this part of the world that demonstrate the character of the Australian landscape faithfully with truth to nature.²⁹

Eugene von Guerard's sentence, written in 1870, meanders in leisurely accordance with the language of the time, but suddenly pulls taut at an important conclusion: *with truth to nature*. Von Guerard was Australia's foremost landscape painter in the mid-nineteenth century, and the first director of the National Gallery of Victoria.³⁰ As such, he was uniquely placed in two separate domains – creation and curation – to influence public perceptions of nature.

According to Christopher Heathcote, von Guerard's view of landscape, and his remarkable control of detail, was also informed by science.³¹ His belief in the synthesis of art and science drew inspiration from the great European naturalists such as Alexander von Humboldt. Ruth Pullin says that von Guerard's eye for the Australian bush was influenced by what he saw as the devastating effects of human intervention, even as early as 1854 when he was living in the Ballarat goldfields.³² Pullin also makes a point of von Guerard's insistence on walking deep into the Australian bush to observe nature in pre-European balance; an approach that, for me, echoed Murgatroyd's quest for physical immersion in the subject at hand. Von Guerard depicted the dry forest around Eureka Hill with fanatical attention to botanical verity, but also with an eye to erosion, deforestation, pollution and everyday human litter. These are artistic values I would associate with modern grief over environmental degradation, but they were real and apparent to von Guerard.³³

To understand von Guerard's insistence on specific depictions of natural systems, it is necessary to go back to his influences. Those identified by Pullin include Johann Christian Reinhart, Joseph Anton Koch and Giambattista Bassi.³⁴ Koch, who was von Guerard's first teacher, had met with Humboldt in Rome and collaborated on his *Atlas Pittoresque* (1810).³⁵ To reduce this formative line to its constituent elements: Humboldt argued that all systems in nature were interconnected; Koch, who

²⁹ R. Pullin, (ed) *Eugene von Guerard: Nature revealed*, Melbourne, Council of Trustees, National Gallery of Victoria 2011.

³⁰ Australian Dictionary of Biography, *Guerard, Johann Joseph Eugen von (1812-1901)*, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/guerard-johann-jospeh-eugen-von-3677, (accessed 5 February 2021).

³¹ C. Heathcote, 'When science meets art: Humboldt, von Guerard and the Australian wilderness.' *Art Monthly Australia*, (145), pp. 27–31.

³² R. Pullin, 'Eugene von Guerard: A Remarkable Life', in R. Pullin, *Nature revealed*, pp.1-13.

³³ R. Pullin, *Nature revealed*, p.27.

³⁴ R. Pullin, *Nature revealed*, p.16.

³⁵ R. Pullin, *Nature revealed*, p.2.

worked with Humboldt, taught von Guerard; and von Guerard evolved a practice of visual representation that insisted on the correct depiction of nature's interconnections.

Where that insistence becomes relevant to writing about history is in the visual analogy it presents regarding the nexus between history and landscape. In 1855, von Guerard painted a grand landscape of Tower Hill, a dormant volcanic crater lake to the northeast of Port Fairy, Victoria.³⁶ At the time of the painting, the lake was the subject of a conservation battle that was uncharacteristically fierce for its time. Von Guerard painted it for one of his patrons, a pastoralist named James Dawson, who was known for his environmental concern as well as his regard for Koori people.³⁷ He rendered it as an oil painting, a watercolour and a series of sketches, openly predicting that the ecological accuracy of his images would be of future use in preserving the crater's remarkable natural values.³⁸ He was right.

Von Guerard returned to his home city of Dusseldorf in 1882, and after he left the minutely observed wonders of Tower Hill were being steadily despoiled. The marshes in the crater lake were dammed, the vegetation was razed and the ground grazed. The volcanic gravel known as scoria was quarried and town waste was dumped in other parts of the crater. Introduced plants and rabbits crowded out the delicate balance of indigenous species recorded by von Guerard. Some 60 years after his visit the crater was a picture of total desolation. When the slow work of revegetation got underway in 1960, living memory had expired, and von Guerard's masterpiece, measuring four feet across and painstakingly detailed, was the only guide to the landscape's prior appearance.

³⁶ E. von Guerard, *Tower Hill* (1855) oil on canvas 68.1cm x 122 cm, on loan to Warrnambool Art Gallery from The Department of Environment, Land Water and Planning. Presented by Miss Effie Thornton, 1966. 09/027.

³⁷ R. Pullin, *Nature revealed*, p.8.

³⁸ E. von Guerard, 'Reply on the critic of Eugene von Guerard's painting of the North Grampians' 1870, James Smith papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, MLMSS 212, cited in R. Pullin, *Nature revealed* p.114.



Fig. 3: Eugene von Guerard, *Tower Hill* (1855) oil on canvas, Warrnambool Art Gallery Victoria

But which of Tower Hill's infinite number of prior appearances is the one that matters? Is it the way it looked at formation, or upon the arrival of Koori people in the area, or at its last known eruption 34,000 years ago, or at some point since then but before European arrival? Von Guerard has included Aboriginal people in his painting, who are identified as Koroitgundji in the National Gallery of Victoria's catalogue.³⁹ To what extent have these people already modified the landscape in the painting, even in 1855? 'Firestick farming', harvesting and seed-scattering were common practices throughout the western Victorian landscape and would logically have been employed to manage this distinctive forest and water source in the middle of an extensive grassland plain.

Von Guerard didn't only intend to depict Tower Hill as utopian nature. He also hints at settlement's inexorable spread: there is a ship on the horizon, and the 22-year-old township of Port Fairy nestles in the western corner of Armstrong Bay. Within 13 years of the moment von Guerard had captured, the townspeople had planted Norfolk Island Pines, and ever after they would mark the western horizon from the painter's vantage point as a serrated line.

³⁹ S. Johnson, 'Volcanoes in Victorian reveal fresh evidence of eruptions 37,000 years ago', ABC News, 26 February 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-26/study-dates-victorian-volcano-that-buried-a-human-made-axe/11991290> (accessed 26 February 2020).

But it is the representation of nature as a whole, nature as a Humboldtian assemblage of related systems, that makes *Tower Hill* such a powerful image.⁴⁰ Having stood at the same vantage point, I know that von Guerard's lake level speaks of plentiful rainfall and that the vivid green of native gasses on a far slope indicates the season is winter or spring. The Aboriginal group camped on the foreground hill is accompanied by a dog: it seems tense, as if something in the bush to north of the camp has caught its attention.

The interaction of understorey and canopy, of cloud and light, the relationship between standing water and topography, between the volcano and the sea: all of these elements are used by the artist to tell the story of a place at a singular point in time. *This is how it was when I saw it*. The relevance of von Guerard's picture here is what it tells us about storytelling and the past. Where stories are easily seen as attempts to re-fashion the past in the language and conventions of the present, von Guerard was doing the exact opposite: he was reaching forward from the past to a future he could not see but might predict, establishing a firm account of what that static moment – 'the past' – looked like. Anyone seeking to understand the undespoiled state of Tower Hill in that future had been given a precise mandate.

The Landscape of the Mind: Psychogeography

If von Guerard can be positioned as a visual documentarian of natural phenomena, where is the equivalent in literature? I looked to his contemporaries but found no common thread there. Naturalist Henry David Thoreau and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson saw divinity in nature, and therefore advocated for its sanctity in a way that looks modern to me as a 21st century reader.⁴¹ But that does not confer an equivalence or a commonality of purpose with von Guerard. Whereas the painter's influences were pan-European and his travels genuinely global, Thoreau and Emerson lived their lives predominantly within America's borders.⁴² More significant for my purposes in examining artistic responses to landscape and in searching for the earliest modern links in literature was the fact that neither Emerson nor Thoreau was writing fiction.

⁴⁰ G. Helferich, *Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We see the World*, New York, Gotham Books, 2004 p.xvii

⁴¹ *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* Boston, Ticknor & Fields 1854; *Nature* Boston, James Munroe and Company 1836.

⁴² R.W. Emerson, 'American Scholar' lecture, 31 August 1837, cited in S. Cheever, *American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau; Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work*, New York, Simon & Schuster; Reprint edition, 2007, p.145.

But Xavier Herbert was. Geordie Williamson, reviewing the 40th anniversary re-release of *Poor Fellow My Country*⁴³ in *The Australian*, writes:

Herbert spent many months traversing the Gulf Country and the Dawson Ranges, the Roper and Daly River regions, in an effort to map out the country of *Poor Fellow*. This gypsy existence involved numerous solitary journeys in a four-wheel drive, camping and composing under the stars. Sometimes, when inspiration overtook, Herbert would leap from his car and run for miles in the landscape, collecting topography and climate as though his entire body were a recording device. Today we would call him a psychogeographer, and it is fair to say that his descriptions of the landscape, flora and fauna are among the book's most arresting passages.⁴⁴

A *psychogeographer*: the implications of the word seem to fit the endeavour perfectly.

'Psychogeography' is a term first coined in France by Guy Debord, a leader of the Situationist International movement of the mid-1950s.⁴⁵ Its initial context was urban design, its purpose to highlight the alienation of artistic practice from the life of the city.⁴⁶ But it has evolved into a way of thinking about literature: Debord's work has been elsewhere defined as "the study of how space influences human psychology",⁴⁷ or in Ella Mudie's reading of it, "the study of the influence that geographical environments exert upon the emotions and behaviours of individuals."⁴⁸ By either definition, its applicability to stories of long-lost landscapes is readily apparent: Patrick White may be called a psychogeographer for his tragic portrayal of Ludwig Leichardt in his 1957 novel *Voss*,⁴⁹ struggling in the drawing rooms of Sydney and finding a prophet's transformation in the desert. White wants us to believe that the scarifying emptiness of the desert is also a wellspring of divine insight.

⁴³ X. Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, Sydney, William Collins, Sons 1975.

⁴⁴ G. Williamson, 'Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* republished for 40th anniversary' in *The Australian*, 28 November 2014.

https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?offerset=ta_4for4_premium&sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Farts%2Freview%2Fxavier-herberts-poor-fellow-my-country-republished-for-40th-anniversary (accessed 27 May 2019).

⁴⁵ G. Debord and A. Jorn, *Memoires*, Copenhagen, Editions Situationist International, 1959. Co-founders included the Italian writer, editor and artist Piero Simondo; and Danish painter Asger Jorn.

⁴⁶ For example, in M. Coverley, *Psychogeography* Chicago, Oldcastle Books, 2010 p.106, the discipline is described as "the point where psychology and geography meet in assessing the emotional and behavioural impact of urban space".

⁴⁷ M. Hart and T. Lown-Hecht, 'The Extraterritorial Poetics of W.G. Sebald' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Summer 2012, Vol 58, No. 2, p.213.

⁴⁸ E. Mudie, *Psychogeography and the novel: fictions of place, motion and identity, 1920-1965*. Ph.D. diss, Sydney, UNSW, September 2015, p.10.

⁴⁹ White, P., *Voss*, Sydney, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957.

The landscape I was examining was only thought to be ‘wilderness’ by reason of the survivors’ inability to see it as densely populated. And the prefix *psycho-* seems to offer the possibility of an intuitive union between thought and ground. I am intrigued by the idea that my coastal wandering was not only research but a sort of dissociative fugue in which I had left my regular self in the parked car and been re-defined, temporarily at least, by the contours of the landscape. Looking at every tree, every cliff and beach with a renewed purpose – the rediscovery of a lost coastline – I had been transported somehow.

But the definition also permits of some slippage between author and subject: we may be talking equally here of the way in which a writer approaches the business of understanding stories in their geographical dimensions or of the emotions and behaviours of the subjects themselves that are under observation. The term seems applicable to both.

For me, working from a present landscape to reimagine a lost one and attempting to position my characters on the psychic plane I have conjured, Mudie’s definition is sufficiently open-ended to suggest a hall of mirrors. In walking the coast, writing and imagining, I am seeking meaning in the landforms: the implications of endless sand flats and rivermouths and waterholes, the daunting scale of eucalypt forests.

I am doing it because I want to rebuild a world for the reader, one that has disappeared from casual view and requires deep thought to reappear. All along, my characters face back towards me, themselves seeking meaning in the land: signs of Yuin presence or potable water or – most tantalisingly of all – signs of Sydney’s approach. Charlotte Grayling falls into a reverie when she loses herself deliberately in the bush outside Sydney. The walkers are by turns awed and intimidated and spooked by the landscape: its hidden glens and marked trees and rocks that, disturbingly, evoke raw meat.⁵⁰ And I am moved by the apparent secrecy of the cycad forests and the empty expanse of Wattamolla Beach; moved to summon the distress and disorientation of these long-forgotten men. This is where the slippage between author and subject becomes evident. The journey I’ve undergone, walking and drawing and writing and trying to tune into the disjunctive temporalities of the forest path, all of it finds its way into my depiction of character. We are all of us – writer and characters – psychogeographers.

⁵⁰ “The sea rocks were streaked with dark reds and greys and even a dull yellow, so they looked to hungry men like lumps of raw fatty meat and offal.” *Preservation*, p.160.

Journeys in the Landscape

This, then, is the common thread through the work of von Guerard, through Murgatroyd's experience and Hills's, through the lens of psychogeography and all the way to me. The physical world must be assimilated somehow so as to cultivate a particular reading experience. The corporeal must be observed and encoded into words. The wandering in landscape must pass through an alchemical transmutation into fiction, at which point the writer (and implicitly, their choices) is at their most visible to the reader. When the journeying is done, it must be brought home somehow, changed but unalloyed.⁵¹ My journeys through the national parks in 2016 would become temporal journeys as much as topographical ones; I would walk back through time. I would watch, as Murgatroyd watched, and make assessments out of the raw evidence of the landscape. By extrapolating from what I saw in front of me, I could describe the land in 1797; looking outwards, centring myself in the universe as the stable hub of a centrifuge in which spun the contested notions of prelapsarian Australia. It wasn't about me, after all.

Except of course it was. In reaching for convincing ways to convey the past to the present, there is a constant danger of over-reach. I began to understand that I could not do it without taking myself along. There is that previously mentioned, unconscious tendency to position the writer as the centre, the known and trusted gatherer of clues and assembler of truths. In saying 'I will draw all these lost elements into the light', the inevitable corollary is 'I will draw them to me.'

Nowhere is this dilemma more evident than in the depiction of landscape: the past had different plants and animals – these things can be observed and corrected. The past had different weather, we now that know and it too can be compensated for. These objective indicia aren't the battlegrounds. What's much tougher to negotiate is the overlay of values – a faithful recording of conventions and attitudes that belong to their time, while somehow indicating to the reader that the author understands and indeed scorns these antiquated standards but will depict them faithfully nonetheless. In taking care to enact exactly those values, I found myself positioned at the unconscious centre. It was me, choosing instances of language and depicting interactions between races and genders. I was not reporting them; I was shaping and selecting them.

The Dendroglyphs: Signposts to Lost Meaning

⁵¹ The epigraph I chose for *Preservation's* sequel *The Burning Island* (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2020) reflected this idea. It is the Swiss mathematician Jakob Bernoulli's maxim, *Eadem mutata resurgo* ("Though changed, I arise the same").

When I walked through the forests of the Ben Boyd National Park near Eden, NSW, my eyes darted constantly between the tall, straight trunks of the spotted gums, searching for the distinctive trunk blazes described in the remarkable 1918 monograph, *The Dendroglyphs or Carved Trees of NSW*.⁵² The author, Robert Etheridge Jr, makes confident observations of dendroglyphs (marked trees generally), taphoglyphs (grave marker trees) and teleteglyphs (specifically-positioned bora ring trees). He includes copious photographs, taken in his travels through the Illawarra up to 1918, of the trees with their markings.

A range of emotions comes flooding to the surface when I look upon these images. The photographs are made with the equipment of the era in grainy black and white, and then rendered grittier still by the process of printing and photocopying, so that they are nearly devoid of graduating shades and composed entirely of stark contrasts. The patterns are imposing: mysterious and stark. My vision of encountering one of these trees in the forest is that it would be unnerving, and not in any way that would illuminate my writing about the landscape. Coupled with this apprehension is a worrying feeling that the photographs should not have been made at all, should not have been published and should not be viewed by me, however anodyne my motives might be in seeking to understand them as evidence of culture. Was I peering at business that was not mine to view? Let loose on historical records and wandering a landscape – in both instances alone – there was very little guidance as to the sensitivity of the material I might unearth. If a simple online search produced Etheridge's *Dendroglyphs* monograph, what other private, sacred and misinterpreted material might I stumble into in the vast collections of universities, museums and public libraries?⁵³ The primary locomotive force of my historical research was curiosity – I was *wondering* about things, not setting out to prove a hypothesis – and I could see, in the pictures of the dendroglyphs, a parallel of what I imagined had befallen the *Sydney Cove* walkers as they sought rescue. I believed they had stumbled into sites that were forbidden to them; in my own way I may have been unknowingly repeating their error.

That flood of emotions is only one ray in a refracted spectrum of light. My reaction says nothing of the reaction of a person with direct lineal descent from the carver. As years went on, over both a century between 1797 and 1918, then another century between the photography and now, the carvings would have gradually crept up the trunks as the trees grew, so that their original alignment

⁵² R. Etheridge (Jnr), *The Dendroglyphs or Carved Trees of NSW*, Sydney, Department of Mines 1918.

⁵³ Etheridge's book is available, for example, in the collection of the National Library of Australia, via its online repository Trove, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/18417851>, (accessed 3 March 2021); also for purchase via Booktopia [website], <https://www.booktopia.com.au/the-dendroglyphs-or-carved-trees-of-new-south-wales-r-jnr-etheridge/book/9781920899769.html>, (accessed 3 March 2021); and as out-of-context "snippet views" on Google Books.

https://books.google.com.au/books/about/The_Dendroglyphs_Or_carved_Trees_of_New.html?id=B7AUPzA5q1MC&redir_esc=y, (accessed 3 March 2021)

and viewing height are changed, along with major indicia of meaning such as language and oral tradition. Who speaks for the tree now? Who listens? What are the words that apply to that phenomenon in the languages of the Yuin, and have they been faithfully passed down to modern scholars and speakers? I cannot say. Fires, natural decay, land clearing, vandalism and a great erasing forgetfulness would have hidden the carvings from the view of all but a select few. I would say the carvings are gone altogether: that if the last one was done around the time of invasion, then that tree is at least 200 years old and the chances of its ongoing survival are slim. But it is not my place to delimit the contents of the deepest forest against those who know the place intimately.

Languages grow in spiritual and cultural contexts that are incommensurate with each other. Etheridge is forthright in his language. He is assertive as to the claims he makes for the meaning of the carved symbols. He refers to them as 'rude heraldry' and notes that there is "some correlation between the designs on trees and those on cloaks: the cloaks were worn fur-side inwards and skin-side outwards."⁵⁴ On the skin side there were markings, 'family marks' that corresponded roughly to those on trees."⁵⁵ When he states with flat certainty that "Ulladulla is the southernmost distribution of the teleteglyphs" he might as easily be making a comment about the distribution of particular tree species in 1918 (after a century of clearing), as about the distribution of culture.⁵⁶ He does not say whether he knows there are no more trees further south (an observation about trees), or whether he has been told the Yuin did not mark trees further south (an observation about people). Does *he* know which he means?

Etheridge sits between the carvers of the trees and us. He is an unreliable mediator.⁵⁷ Working without a Rosetta Stone to translate the carvings, he instead labels them with elegant formal adjectives such as 'fluctuate', 'serpentine', 'horologiate' (hour glass) and 'lunate'.⁵⁸ The presence or absence of a transliterative key is of no great import in any event: it assumes – as do the many colonial vocabularies of Aboriginal groups that were compiled even as the genocides proceeded – that the underlying concepts represented by the markings are capable of translation by the mere

⁵⁴ R. Etheridge, *Dendroglyphs*, p.20.

⁵⁵ R. Etheridge, *Dendroglyphs*, p.29.

⁵⁶ R. Etheridge, *Dendroglyphs*, p.90.

⁵⁷ In her 2015 review of a re-release of Etheridge's work, Jeanette Hope notes that "Reading *The Dendroglyphs* or 'Carved Trees' of New South Wales, it would appear that none of Etheridge's informants were Aboriginal..." J. Hope, 'Review of 'The Dendroglyphs or 'Carved Trees' of New South Wales' by Robert Etheridge', in *Australian Archaeological Association Journal* 30 May 2015 <https://australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au/journal/review-of-the-dendroglyphs/>, (accessed 6 February 2021).

⁵⁸ J. Hope, *Review*, p.9.

attachment of English words. Even if every tree's symbol was named and described in English by some unseen hand, we may yet be well short of understanding their deeper significance.

As I wrote *Preservation*, I collected lists of words and vocabularies, thinking I would deploy these in scenes where there was interaction between the Yuin and my characters. But the problem I have alluded to in the previous paragraph was insurmountable. To take an example, Michael Organ's 1993 paper *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770-1900* contains a list of over 2000 words attributed to the Thururwal (Dharawal) and Thurga (Thaui) peoples.⁵⁹ The sources of these translations are provided as a separate list, and there are 32 of them, ranging from Aboriginal Australians to maritime explorers, to overseers, pastoralists and a French scientist. Each of these people must have had inbuilt biases and blind spots in their understanding of language: what happens when all of their observations are combined into a single vocabulary? Meanings must surely overlap each other, and deeper concepts – such as the meanings of the dendroglyphs – may be overlooked in favour of readily identifiable objects.

I grappled with this sense of lost meaning in writing my novel. The idea of the trees was creatively compelling, but what to say about them was far from clear. In *Preservation*, when the three surviving walkers encounter a marked tree in the latter stages of their ordeal, they are hallucinating after having eaten a toxic groundcover – a fictional element I added to heighten their confusion. The three of them (the narrative perspective is that of the Lascar boy Srinivas talking to Clark) respond to the carvings – and more broadly to the task of deciphering the landscape – in different ways, each representing their apportioned roles in the story. Thus:

There, at exactly your eye level, a little over my head, the bark had been cut away in a great sheet, leaving a diamond-shaped scar where the wood beneath had been cut over and over again into patterns of short angled lines like the meat of a fish. The cuts were new: so new that the sliced flesh of the tree bled sap from its wounds. The cuts were intended and they were not made to remove the bark. They were a message to any who passed the tree. I felt they were a dire warning: cold dread flowed through me...

There's a saltire innit, you said to yourself, Mr Clark, in the oddest voice. In the tree. Aye, tis Andrew's Cross.

⁵⁹ M. K. Organ, *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770-1900, Report to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Canberra, 1 December 1993*, University of Wollongong, 1993 (pages unnumbered).

Mr Figge had his fingers on the cuts in the bark, walking them slow over the sticky sap. He held his palm up so it faced you like a sign of its own, and his eyes just then were not of our world. 'Tis a sign of some sort, Clark,' he said. 'Would ye care to go another way?'⁶⁰

And still Etheridge's monograph can be taken from a library shelf and imported into stories like mine. Those trees that stood as signposts to meanings of which the Yuin were and are custodians are now equally enmired in processes of reproduction, interpretation and separation from context that can reduce any deployment of them in story to the status of a wild guess.

The Right to Tell the Story

By this point in the creative process, a canyon is starting to open. On one side of the chasm, the bright, practical business of writing a novel is well underway: there is a contract, a putative release date and the early flirtations with advance publicity. I have created targets for myself: the milestones of accumulated words and drafts set against dates. I have arranged my working and personal lives to account for the commitment. On the other side is an increasing awareness that all is not as it seemed: that it is no simple matter to 'find' 1797 and its inhabitants and replicate them on the page. The landscape has become unreadable in all sorts of ways and requires extrapolation from the damaged present.

Nowhere is this clearer than in regard to the Gunai Kurnai and the Yuin: the presence of Aboriginal people on the land in 1797 demands recognition in historical storytelling, but these nations represent realities that are fundamentally different to my own, and which will not easily yield to research and good intentions. It is necessary to find the relevant information – the appearance of people, their diet and ways of life, their weaponry, their inclinations towards the *Sydney Cove* walkers. But it is also necessary to consider the balance of that study in the overall written work: on any subject, including Aboriginal people, it is possible to dwell too long, or to transgress by appropriating voices, or become condescending, or simply be in error. And the story, in its simplest narrative form – the quest of the walkers for safety – must be allowed to take prominence in the writing.

Where a story centres upon the lives of Aboriginal Australians, there is no shortage of guidance at hand. The *Protocols for Using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts*, published by the Australia Council, gives authoritative and practical advice on such topics as Secrecy and

⁶⁰ *Preservation*, Text Publishing p.230 / this document p.170.

Confidentiality, Attribution and Benefit Sharing, among others.⁶¹ These practical interventions are important in averting carelessness and arrogance in storytelling. But they are not a panacea. There is a threshold question to resolve before the *Protocols* come into play: before I can ask 'How do I tell this story?' it is necessary to inquire 'Who can tell this story?'

For the first time, I had assumed the right to tell a story only to have the story look me square in the eye and ask *What right do you have to tell me?* I found the answer to this question, across a range of storytelling forms, varied considerably. When, as here, the story is composed of fragments that come from different individuals, nationalities and times, that threshold question does not provide an easy answer. The tale of the *Sydney Cove*, as much as it emerges from Clark's (published) diary, was also told by the shipwreck artefacts held in the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston. And separately again, it was a story that belonged to descendants of the Yuin peoples whom the survivors encountered. Who was I among these sources?

But the point of entry can also be, as it was in *Preservation*, multiple points represented by multiple character voices. I chose this method for the novel, speaking through Figge, Srinivas and Clark in the first person as well as seeing the world through Eliza Grayling's eyes in the third person, in order to show the many faces of the story, and also to avoid the presumption that one omniscient voice – mine – might convey all the nuances of the history. The story begins with the loading of the *Sydney Cove* in Calcutta, then meanders across the Indian Ocean, the Furneaux Islands of Bass Strait, the country of the Gunai Kurnai and the Yuin, and the land around *Warrane*/Sydney Harbour and upriver to Parramatta. It would take in Bengalis, traders, Scotsmen, Lascars, convicts, Aboriginal Australians from up to seven language groups,⁶² the government classes and the Rum Corps.

To say that the story inhered completely in any one of these groups or places would be an oversimplification. But nonetheless, significant parts of it belonged in cultural contexts other than my own. I set out to reflect the atomised state of the evidence and the 'mad meandering' of different territories by offering those shifting narrative viewpoints: Srinivas, Clark and Figge. I was an outsider looking into the lives of Malays and the Indochinese when I wrote of their lives as Lascars. Again, I was a dilettante talking of the Walbanja or the Thaua. The landscapes, as I have said, were not 'mine' in any sense. Each time these deep immersions – these journeys into unfamiliar landscapes and human cultures – became necessary as the story moved along, I needed to navigate by two poles: diligence and humility – doing the work and maintaining an awareness of my own

⁶¹ Dr. T. Janke, *Protocols for Using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts*, Sydney, Australia Council 2019.

⁶² J. Besold, 'Language Recovery of the New South Wales South Coast Aboriginal Languages', Ph.D. diss, Canberra, Australian National University 2013 pp.1-5, cited in M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, p.215 n.2.

presence. I was not just watching (for example) the Djirringany people of Wallaga Lake: I was actively interpreting them for an imagined reader, and in doing so I needed to take care that I was accurate and respectful.

I would research thoroughly, looking for published books on each cultural group as well as academic papers and online sources such as local council and Aboriginal representative body websites, disclose my storytelling aims and my other sources of information to each contributor and consult as widely as possible. So I made repeated phone calls to the Bega Shire Council, having scoured their website for First Nations liaisons. The search led me to one particular Yuin man, Graham Moore, who answered copious questions over multiple phone conversations.⁶³ I tried to corroborate everything I could find with academic sources, with ordinary histories.

Voices Heard and Unheard

If I manifested the privileges of white, male, middle-class existence in modern Australia, then it seemed likely that I would tune my dials – consciously or otherwise – to people who sounded like me. White men, and predominantly military ones, were the exclusive reporters of the *Sydney Cove* story.⁶⁴ But in fact I was doing the opposite: I was trying to find the gaps in the dominant narrative and channel other, unheard voices into the novel.

Ranajit Guha identifies the peril of being seduced by the grander narratives when telling such stories as that of the *Sydney Cove* trek:

Designed for big events and institutions, (historiography) is most at ease when made to operate on those larger phenomena which visibly stick out of the debris of the past. As a result, historical scholarship has developed... a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths.⁶⁵

It was the ‘small drama’ that I was after. Guha’s argument here draws focus on a crucial aspect of the tale; one that I have tried to emphasise in my novel. Although concerned with ‘big events’, *Preservation* spends time on small dramas: the tedium, fear and deprivation experienced especially

⁶³ Telephone discussions – Graham Moore, June and July 2017.

⁶⁴ In addition to Clark/Bladen’s cited account, there is Captain Gavin (Guy) Hamilton, *Notice – Sydney Cove – Ship*, in *Ship’s Protests of Bills 1792-1815*, Judge Advocate’s Office, Archives Office of New South Wales, Ref. 5/1162 pp.64-73; and correspondence, Governor John Hunter to Sir Joseph Banks, 15 August 1797, Mitchell Library Reference CY 866.

⁶⁵ R. Guha, *Chandra’s Death*, p.138, cited in P. Gopal, *Reading Subaltern History*, Cambridge University Press 2004.

by Srinivas and the other Lascars. Perhaps my instinctive turn towards the 'lost' or 'unheard' voices among my cast of characters is a recognition that they suit the subject matter.

The fact is that the *Sydney Cove* story in its written form, as a combination of scholarly and public writing over 220 years, is crammed with other voices. Just because they are often obscured in the archive, those voices are no less available to the imagination. Writing a novel was an opportunity to redefine the story with the aid of new perspectives. There were approximately 44 Lascar seamen aboard the ship, 13 of whom went on to form the majority of the longboat party of 17.⁶⁶ Then there are the voices of the First Nations peoples who assisted the surviving walkers: members of the Gunai Kurnai nation in the east Gippsland region of what is now Victoria,⁶⁷ and of the coastal Yuin peoples: the Thaua,⁶⁸ Djirringany,⁶⁹ Walbanja, Wandandean and Tharawal.⁷⁰

There were other Scotsmen on the *Sydney Cove* to whom I did not give any active presence. There were traders, speculators and administrators in Sydney I could have introduced into the tale and thereby created multiple new perspectives, but I did not. There were other white women in the colony – historical ones, in contradistinction against the fictional Charlotte Grayling – whom I could have featured.⁷¹

In the telling of the Sydney end of the drama, the same historical fixation with military males is encountered and can again be countered. If Sydney was an aggregation of convicts under administrative rule, then it is natural that that administrative class will take upon itself the task of documenting society. With that assumption of authorship must necessarily come a set of values and indeed prejudices that might cloud, or at least impart bias upon, the rendering of history. This did not invalidate what I read as the documentary record of the times, but it did serve to remind me of the need for critical reading. The effort to read critically, and to search for other voices, came with its own set of entanglements: in choosing the marginalised voices to bring to the foreground, I was engaged in the God-like business of handpicking the people and groups I would co-opt into speaking roles.

⁶⁶ M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, p.9.

⁶⁷ Telephone discussions and email correspondence with Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Corporation and Lynette Solomon-Dent, February 2018.

⁶⁸ Telephone discussions with Graham Moore, Bega Shire Council, March-April 2018.

⁶⁹ G. Moore, telephone discussions.

⁷⁰ M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, pp.30-36.

⁷¹ Grace Karskens includes women's accounts of early Sydney, including those of Margaret Catchpole and Mary Reiby in the chapter, 'A Very Bountiful Place Indeed' (pp.310-350) in *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2009.

My choices of personnel had implications for depictions of many kinds in the novel. I knew that I was in the business of explaining violence much of the time, often as much as I was explaining landscapes or Indigenous peoples. The eyes that saw the violence, in storytelling terms, would determine the reader's experience of it. In the case of the *Sydney Cove* wreck and odyssey, the violence is implicit, slow-moving and hard to capture, but in settler-colonial terms it is undoubtedly there. Despite the tantalising prospect of friendly relations, people went missing in the bush, both in Sydney and among the survivors of the *Sydney Cove*. Some survivors were speared – in Clark's case precisely through both hands, giving rise to an inference that the spearing was a deliberate ritual act.⁷² A rescue ship was lost at sea. The Sydney that the walkers saw as their deliverance was itself under siege from insurgents such as Pemulwuy and Goam Boak.⁷³ And every exploratory chapter of the walk – the discovery of seals, of coal, of Bass Strait itself – would provide an underpinning for industry, commerce and the expansion of settler populations. Author and researcher Patsy Cameron writes that:

Sealing as a commercial enterprise emerged with the discovery in 1797 of large colonies of seals in the small islands around eastern Bass Strait. Trade in sealskins and oil soon became Sydney Town's major commercial enterprise....⁷⁴

The tragic saga of George Augustus Robinson's 'Friendly Mission' to Christianise the *palawa* of *Iutruwita* would not have been possible without the rescue mission undertaken by the *Sydney Cove* crew.⁷⁵ All of these consequences arise swiftly in the years immediately after the *Sydney Cove* trek, and they leave lasting marks on history: for nearly 200 years, Robinson's mission was held to have caused the 'extinction of the Tasmanians.'⁷⁶ Somehow, my novel needed to depict the instances of violence that characterised early Sydney and the survivors' trek; and also the systemic, decades-long

⁷² A. Ravenscroft, 'The Strangeness of the Dance: Kate Grenville, Rohan Wilson, Inga Clendinnen and Kim Scott' in *Meanjin* Volume 72, Number 4, 2013.

⁷³ The lives of both men are related in E. Wilmott, *Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior*, Sydney, Bantam Books 1987.

⁷⁴ P. Cameron, *Grease and Ochre: The Blending of Two Cultures at the Colonial Sea Frontier*, Hobart, Fullers Bookshop 2011, p.50. Nash provides another clear example of this sequence: George Bass followed Clark's instructions in August 1797 and found the coal deposit Clark had mentioned: "...in later years large-scale mining operations were developed in the area – the Illawarra coalfield still supplies the steel manufacturing works at nearby Port Kembla as well as providing coal for export." M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, pp.64-65.

⁷⁵ Documented in N.J.B. Plomley (Ed.) *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834* (2nd Edn), Launceston, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Quintus Publishing 2008. Where possible this paper uses agreed First Nations language in reference to place-names – in this case the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre-approved stylings for Tasmanian Aborigines (*palawa*) and Tasmania itself (*Iutruwita*).

⁷⁶ References to 'extinction' abound in 19th and 20th-century writings about *palawa*. As examples: H. Ling Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania* (2nd edition), Halifax, UK, F. King & Sons, 1899, p.v., B. Beatty, *Tasmania: Isle of Splendour*, Melbourne, Cassell Australia, 1967 pp.1-3. c/f T. Lawson, *The Last Man: A British Genocide in Tasmania*, London, I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd., 2014, pp.9-10.

violence that was being done to Aboriginal societies by expanding white civilisation. These parallel threads of observation are well-served by using the voices that might not so often feature in history.

A Silent Observer: The Voice of Srinivas

‘Following the walkers’ as my choice of narrative mode offered an opportunity to use a less-obvious perspective: the interior voice of Srinivas. While based upon the historical figure of the young Lascar who was William Clark’s manservant and who would ultimately be one of the survivors of the trek, Srinivas existed only as a skeletal outline in Clark’s dairy. He is, in all other respects for me, a *tabula rasa* – a screen onto which I sought to project ideas about the story of the trek. Srinivas is not an exposition of historical truth, but through my invention of him I aimed to explore the radical cultural differences that existed among mariners and settlers in the first years of Australia’s European settlement. I wanted a set of eyes watching the others – Clark and Figge in particular. I wanted a perspective on the beauty and terror of the bush, and a voice to question why the offered protection of various Yuin communities didn’t amount to having arrived at ‘salvation.’ I wanted a representative of the south Asian communities that European merchant shipping had exploited for centuries in its hunger for seafaring indentured labour. Being possessed of no exterior voice – his companions, believing his claim to have no English, do not bother to engage him in conversation – Srinivas can be depicted through his thoughts alone. He would ruminate about his companions, I thought. He would be caught between a sense of duty, compelling him to share in their quest for ‘salvation’ in Sydney, but equally he would be drawn to the beauty of what he saw around him in the bush, and the lives of the Yuin that may have seemed, in comparison to his own, secure and healthy. These were the ‘small dramas’ I could place in the foreground, shaped by the young Lascar’s reflections on landscape. In this passage, Srinivas is describing a jagged scar in the coastal scrub, something that confounds him with its *otherness* in a landscape that he is still trying to decipher:

We came upon a cut in the slope behind the beach where the land opened like a wound and the trees stopped and all was rock and gravel, twenty yards wide. The gentlemen argued over what it was: some said it was made by God; you, Mr Clark, said it was no more than a natural fold in the land. A Javanese man said it was made by the natives and that it was a quarry. He said it quiet, not wanting to upset the gentlemen... but he would not be shaken from his view.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ *Preservation*, Text Publishing p.159 / this document p.120.

Here I am using Srinivas's voice – more accurately his internal monologue – to apply a visitor's interpretation to a landform long familiar to Aboriginal Australians: a natural occurrence in the Ben Boyd National Park, near present-day Pambula, known in contemporary terms as The Pinnacles. In this particular instance there is no reason to think the landform is any different in 2020 to what it was in 1797, so the reader is positioned in the 18th century looking backwards. Srinivas, in this passage, is reporting to us the guesses of others about the landform: the speculation about it is not his. To begin with, 'landscape' as a construct would have been unknown to him. Having spent his youth at sea and not in a classroom, he may have had intrinsic ideas about the forms of coastlines: 'this is a bay', 'that is a fringing reef', but in my imagining of him he would form those ideas as an autodidact, simply by reading the shapes and colours of the coast as they emerged in front of him. Were the Yuin altering the landscape by quarrying it? That is one guessing game wrapped in another: the writer, speculating that the walker – Srinivas – might wonder (or at least ruminate upon the wonderings of others) at the industrial activities of the occupants of the place.



Fig. 4: The Pinnacles (author photo)

Srinivas, in this extract, is doing all the narrative work I had alluded to above: he is signalling the thinking of the Europeans to the reader; examining the countryside and inching towards knowledge of how the Yuin were living upon the land. And above all, as author I am trying to deploy him to

break down and disguise my preconceptions about that moment in the hope that the reader might see it with fresh eyes. There is another way in which Srinivas's perspective is important. In seeing the 1797 landscape and reporting it to the reader, I needed to make assessments about values. As we look upon the trees and the grasslands, beaches and estuaries, what do we (the reader and I) say is worthy and significant, and what is mere scene-setting? A way to tackle this was to give each of my narrating walkers – Clark, Figge and Srinivas – a clear set of values about the things they were looking at. In this way I was able simultaneously to present three separate interpretations of the rush to conquer and colonise.

Firstly there is Srinivas; a naïf by reason of his younger years and his utter unfamiliarity with the Australian continent. I imagined he would see everything around him as though freshly painted, as if each new day will bring untold wonders. He has no desire to conquer and accepts the land's ascendancy over him. He does not seek to turn it *into* anything; rather, he consistently adapts to its demands. These traits are important to the story: by rendering Srinivas as a passive but acute observer, I am able to use him to report all sorts of details to the reader. And in terms of his own character logic, he is more likely to survive the ordeal of the walk by remaining inconspicuous. He must avoid conflict and use guile and feign ignorance of the interpersonal conflicts around him.

Clark, on the other hand, looks at everything around him in ruthlessly mercantile terms. In this sense, he comes nearest to embodying a stereotypical understanding of colonisation: that the land and its resources were a birthright of English and Scottish empire-builders, there to be taken.

Nothing personal. Clark knows he will have to explain himself to the authorities in Sydney and later to his superiors in Calcutta – he has lost a ship, valuable cargo and people's lives. So he has an eye at all times upon what the offsets might be, such as opportunities for commerce and personal fame. Of Jervis Bay, he tells the Governor it is "...deep, sir... an excellent anchorage, I would think."⁷⁸ Of the Yuin, he comments, "I saw no evidence of modern society among them. They could be subdued without incident, I believe, in the course of opening up the land."⁷⁹ I hoped that some readers might read that line as a comment on the notion of *terra nullius*: that there was widespread awareness of pre-existing occupancy of the land – despite the legal pretence otherwise – but that it was unlikely to present an obstacle.

Mr Figge, on the other hand, is a waft of sulphur from my own imagination. He does not represent a facet of colonialism, but a reaction of mine to colonialism's wreckage. He is both affect and effect, a consequence, something vague and filled with dread. He is, in shorthand, the damage done. His

⁷⁸ *Preservation*, p.267.

⁷⁹ *Preservation*, p.190.

worldly ambition, whether to secure fame or monetary gain out of the *Sydney Cove*'s wrecking, is obscure. He is out to create mayhem, and he sees those around him in classically sociopathic terms: they are there for his entertainment or gratification, but he does not consider them in terms of their own humanity. He owes more to the ancient Jewish tradition of the *dybbuk*, or to Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden⁸⁰ or Ian McGuire's Henry Drax,⁸¹ than to any supporting evidence in the *Sydney Cove* story. He expresses no particular prejudice against Aboriginal people, not because he is racially enlightened but because he doesn't think about them *at all* except in terms of his own interests.

Charlotte Grayling, the Explorer Within

The fictional Charlotte Grayling, a young officer's wife in Sydney, is another attempt to pivot away from myself, here and now, as a white, male, modern perspective. Or – to frame that idea more actively – an opportunity to explore early Sydney through other eyes. Although I am again caught in the dilemma of having summoned her, and therefore influenced perspective, she represents an opportunity to see the place differently. Her descriptions of the landscape are mostly of Sydney's (then) hinterland:

Voices in the trees. The demented chatter and song of the birds, challenge and seduction shouted over each other like the drunks. And higher than the birds, the sea air breathing over the canopy, making it shudder and murmur. The leaves of the giant eucalypts tapped each other on their hard edges, the touches in their millions collecting into a great sigh, and as the wind slowed from each gust the sigh disintegrated again into the singular, hard touches of the leaves.⁸²

Here the reader is positioned in 2018, squinting their eyes to try to see what Charlotte saw, what the urban sprawl of, say, Newtown or Marrickville might have looked like as eucalypt forest. Unlike Srinivas in the previous passage, Charlotte is not speculating about anything, merely observing. It is myself as writer and my imagined reader who must do the speculating.

Charlotte's origins are worthy of brief explanation. While initially I considered the idea of having a female character or characters onboard the *Sydney Cove* as a minority or dissenting voice, I wanted

⁸⁰ C. McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, New York, Random House 1985.

⁸¹ I. McGuire, *The North Water*, New York, Henry Holt & Co, 2016. Other examples of the archetype are the character of Lucifer in the Rolling Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* or Professor Woland in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Paris, YMCA Press, 1967.

⁸² *Preservation*, Text Publishing p.154 / this document p.116.

the composition of the crew to cleave as closely as possible to historical reality. If I tinkered with the fundamentals of how the voyage was undertaken, it seemed to me that I was dispensing with the basic elements that give it its power, a point made by Kate Grenville about the writing of her 2005 novel, *The Secret River*.⁸³

But to write a woman into the Sydney scenes in *Preservation* was more achievable. And indeed, a narrative possibility presented itself: the fictional investigator Lieutenant Joshua Grayling needed a foil, a sceptical 'sounding-board' who would interrogate his ideas and challenge him, in the detective tradition of Eco's William of Baskerville and Adso of Melk.⁸⁴ Who better than his own wife?

So enters Charlotte: strong-willed, rebellious and unafraid of the bush. This last trait is significant: it is evident in the archive that much public discourse in early Sydney concerned the dangers of the habitat.⁸⁵ Pemulwuy, the feared Cadigal warrior, was at large at the time in which *Preservation* is set. He had committed murder and arson, and he did not appear to distinguish between his targets. His objective, according to contemporary reports, was mayhem. Even the Eora were said to be dismayed by Pemulwuy's insistence on armed conflict.⁸⁶ And although he was the most prominent example, there were other 'outlaw' figures in the bush around Sydney upon whom to fixate: Goam Boak, Black Cesar and their bands of followers were similarly despised and feared by the settlers:

There were killers out there, the town said. Thieves of womanly virtue. They were as black as death and they moved without sound and they used the stones themselves for razors to lay open the white flesh of innocents. Pemulwuy was out there, and though she knew little of who he was, she knew what he represented. Pemulwuy was the darkness.⁸⁷

Aside from these threats, there was superstition and ignorance about the dangers of the bush. Heat, fire, bushrangers, poisonous and aggressive animals and the elements themselves were all considered reasons to stay within the cleared confines of the township.

I wrote Charlotte to challenge these norms; to rail against her preordained role as an officer's wife, demure and passive, and openly challenge her husband – exasperate him at times despite their strong bond. I wanted to position her as neither an exemplar of the convict/prostitute archetype that features prominently in stories of early Sydney,⁸⁸ nor of the small group of genteel women who

⁸³ K. Grenville, *The Secret River*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2005, discussed in T. Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and Their Craft*, Melbourne, Black Inc. 2016, p.252.

⁸⁴ U. Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, Milan, Bompiani, 1983.

⁸⁵ 'Pemulwuy's War', in G. Karskens, *The Colony*, pp.474-81.

⁸⁶ G. Karskens, *The Colony*, p.480.

⁸⁷ *Preservation*, Text Publishing p.41 – this document p.38.

⁸⁸ S. Rees, *The Floating Brothel*, Sydney, Hachette 2002, D. J. Swiss, *The Tin Ticket: The Heroic Journey of Australia's Convict Women*, New York, Berkley 2010.

are seen as figures of destiny – most notably Elizabeth Macarthur,⁸⁹ Elizabeth Paterson and Anna Josepha King.⁹⁰ Between those two poles – fame and impoverished anonymity – there must have been a large population of ordinary women going about their lives. In Charlotte, I saw an opportunity to explore them dramatically.

I also saw an opportunity to have her go into the bush looking for the thrill of being lost. She wanted to be engulfed by the wilderness, scared by it – that was the very point of going. The landscape served, for her, as physical and spiritual abandon. Amid the settlement's rapacious hurry to exploit the natural world, Charlotte is an observer of the quiet and vulnerable things. At times she seems wistfully to cling to visions of a land undefiled, clutching at ephemeral moments. She raises the possibility of Sydney as a place of beauty; serene and not yet the engine of genocide.

Here I have her standing on a rise on a moonlit night, watching the Gadigal women far below on Sydney Harbour/Warrane in their *nowies*, cooking fires and babies delicately balanced on board, their voices ringing through the placid night. The words I've given Charlotte are in part an echo of Joseph Lycett's 1817 watercolour *Fishing by Torchlight, Other Aborigines beside Campfire Cooking Fish*.⁹¹

When she closed her eyes the tracks of the moving lights were there on the insides of her eyelids, maps of an unknowable world. The eyes of the women down there, she thought, might see through the ink of the night-time sea; a sense—sight but not seeing—that belonged to the slow passage of generations.⁹²

⁸⁹ M. Scott Tucker, *Elizabeth Macarthur: A Life at the Edge of the World*, Melbourne, Text Publishing 2018 and K. Grenville, *A Room Made of Leaves*, Melbourne, Text Publishing 2019.

⁹⁰ 'Genteel Women and Convict Women' in G. Karskens, *The Colony*, pp.339-47.

⁹¹ Original held by National Library of Australia: image scanned from a 35mm slide made by Dr John Turner (1933-1998). The University of Newcastle, *Living Histories @UON*, [website] <https://livinghistories.newcastle.edu.au/nodes/view/5987>, (accessed 14 April 2020).

⁹² *Preservation*, Text Publishing p.310 / this document p.230.



Fig. 5: Joseph Lycett, *Fishing by Torchlight, Other Aborigines beside Campfire Cooking Fish* (1817)
National Library of Australia: image scanned from a 35mm slide made by Dr John Turner (1933-1998).

There is no other point in the novel where I am closer to emerging from the shadows of my characters. Charlotte's observation is *me*, placing myself on high ground that I'm not even sure exists and looking down upon a body of water that was still more *Warrane* than it was 'Sydney Harbour.' Charlotte is just strong enough to hold the illusion for the reader, but it's me all right. And here my inbuilt biases are given free rein: pity and wonder and grief and guilt at the wondrous sight of the wandering specks of flame on the still water.

Writing Aboriginal Australians

Differentiation

The Gunai Kurnai in eastern Gippsland and the coastal Yuin (Katungul) were both witnesses and hosts to the 17 men who walked north from their wrecked longboat in March 1797. Mark McKenna makes the point that each group was likely to have observed the walkers for a period before engaging with them, and that they may also have been privy to advance intelligence about the arrival of these strangers via communication networks between clans and even nations.⁹³ The Thaua, Djirringany, Walbanja, Wandandean and Tharawal people all played roles in the journey, and

⁹³ M. McKenna, *From the Edge*, p.21 "...the Kurnai no doubt observed them from the beginning of their trek..."

wittingly or otherwise they were protagonists in the revelation of that coast to the authorities in Sydney.

This was an idea I loved the moment I found it: that the bush, cryptic and impenetrable to the settlers, might be alive with the branches and nodes of human communication, fizzing with messages, rumours and warnings. News of the invaders might travel at many times the speed that the invaders themselves could summon. But after news of white arrival had rushed inwards, the ramifications of that moment of revelation cascaded outwards as massacre, disease, loss of country and resources, dislocation and erosion of culture.

I was struck early in the research process by the realisation that for the *Sydney Cove* walkers the undifferentiated mass known colonially as ‘the natives’ in fact splinters into a network of related but entirely distinct societies. The *Regional Histories of New South Wales* series describes the layout of these societies as follows:

This coastal area (being the valleys of the Moruya, Tuross, Bega and Towamba rivers in southern New South Wales) was occupied by a fairly high density of Aborigines... the drainage basins of the Towamba and Bega Rivers were precisely the territories of the Taua (or ‘Thaua’) and Djiringanj (*sic*) groups respectively; and in the north the region of the Walbanga (*sic*) occupied the whole of the valleys north of the Tuross and Moruya rivers. The only parts where a drainage basin did not coincide with occupation by a single Aboriginal group were the two parallel basins north of Bateman’s Bay, where the Wandandian and Walbanga border seems to have cut right across the basins from east to west.⁹⁴

McKenna pays close attention to differences in language and custom that arise as sharply as upon the crossing of a rivermouth; and the shifts in cultural tolerances that might have resulted in the provision of food, water and shelter on the one hand, and a ritual spearing of the kind suffered by William Clark on the other.⁹⁵

Understanding the differences between these groups struck me as a clear, practical act of cultural recognition. Here was something I could learn from present-day Aboriginal people and apply to the work. Here were lazy assumptions about Aboriginal homogeneity I could help to unmake. But here also was a striking dramatic platform: for the walkers, this was an unknown land. It might contain

⁹⁴ *Regional Histories of New South Wales* (Heritage Office and Department of Urban Affairs and Planning NSW, 1 January 1996) ‘14. South Coast’, p. 164.

⁹⁵ M. McKenna, *From the Edge*. The passage under the chapter title ‘Walking the Edge’ South-East Australia’ at pp.19-37 forms the backbone of my depiction of exchanges between the *Sydney Cove* walkers and Aboriginal Australians in *Preservation*.

carnivores, toxins, parasites and dangerous waters. But above all, it was known to contain 'natives', whose temperament could not be accurately anticipated.⁹⁶ Thus the walkers proceeded, it seems fair to assume, in a state of caution bordering upon paranoia.

It is a fraught exercise attempting to distil what might have been the Indigenous reactions to their bedraggled visitors, and it was an exercise I avoided wherever possible in my novel. As a fundamental rule, I decided against any attempt at narrative through Aboriginal eyes as an impermissible appropriation.

Salvation

But one speculation remains compelling: each nation – and within it, each language group – would have moved about their country in patterns and routes that reflected harvesting, firing or hunting practices.⁹⁷ These movements would not have conformed to latitude or longitude, or even necessarily to the contours of the land. Yet here was a group of men walking resolutely from south to north along the coast. The very pattern of their movement would have drawn attention to them, driven as it was by a desire for salvation – Sydney – rather than the practice of traditional life in a known world.

I was fascinated by this notion of salvation, and while I did not want to explore the collision of worlds through Aboriginal eyes, I did so through the eyes of Srinivas, the Bengali teenager who – I imagined – must have wondered, coming from the riverbank slums of Calcutta, why Sydney would be salvation and not the very societies they were passing through: all the necessities of life could be had there, along with peace and good health. This was a truth that emerged for me only gradually, as the writing journey merged itself into the journey being narrated: *what was so special about Sydney?* Yet the Scots, positioned in authority as a vestigial remnant of shipboard hierarchies, ground relentlessly northward. They had to raise a rescue for the other survivors; they also had the temptations of fame to think about.

When eventually the last three surviving walkers are rescued and brought into Sydney, young Srinivas makes clear that he wishes to return to the bush, and Charlotte Grayling is baffled:

'There is a thing I don't understand, Srinivas,' she said. 'I don't understand how you could struggle as you did for safety, only to turn your back on it. That distance you walked, no man

⁹⁶ For example, see P. Crabbe, *The Jervis Bay Region 1788-1939: An Emptied Landscape*, Huskisson, Lady Denman Heritage Complex, 2007 p.3: "Sailing westward, Captain James Cook and the Endeavour left New Zealand on 1 April 1770... The first sightings of Aboriginals were made at Brush Island, near Murramorang."

⁹⁷ J. Blay, *Old Pathways*, pp.9-11. John Blay lists 18 separate ritual and seasonal pathways in the Bega Valley that pre-dated contact.

has even contemplated it before. You survived all these terrors I can barely imagine—you survived Mr Figge. And now you have found refuge you don't want it anymore?'⁹⁸

Unlearning the Tropes of 'First Contact'

There was another aspect to the depiction of Aboriginal people that offered the chance to unmake commonly-held assumptions. It lay in the telling of a so-called 'first-contact' story, a term that carries its own freight of preconceptions.

There is a stereotype that has built up around settler/Aboriginal encounters on the Australian continent. It has focused upon white ascendancy: either in circumstances of benevolence or violence, but in either case the Anglo-Celtic parties have control of the exchange and the volition to determine its outcome.⁹⁹

To draw an imaginary thread through all of these:

- (a) They take place at the frontier, near the margins where settled country ends and remnant forest begins;
- (b) The settler parties are dressed in military uniforms or formal civilian clothes;
- (c) The settler parties are armed with guns and mounted on horseback;
- (d) The Aboriginal parties are on foot and armed with spears, wumeras and perhaps boomerangs;
- (e) Business is conducted in pidgin and with gestures, perhaps drawn in the ground with a stick,¹⁰⁰ and
- (f) There is a trade of food and/or trinkets for passage or access to land; a promise of good relations.

Less attention is devoted to encounters where the settler-colonialists found themselves on the back foot. Invariably these were rescue situations, whereupon the distressed explorers or mariners were reliant upon Aboriginal expertise to deliver them from peril.

But instances abound: In 1858, cabin boy Narcisse Pelletier survived the wreck of the *Saint-Paul* off New Guinea and was taken in by the Uutaalnganu people of Cape York. He lived among them for 17 years.¹⁰¹ The Royal Society of Victoria ('Burke and Wills') expedition of 1860-61 ended in disaster in

⁹⁸ *Preservation*, Text Publishing pp.335-36 / this document p.248.

⁹⁹ G. Karskens, 'Encounters in Eora Country', in *The Colony*, pp. 34-60.

¹⁰⁰ A significant expansion in these communications, of course, was "Governor Davey's Proclamation", painted in Van Diemen's Land in about 1830. It was made to be nailed to a tree and depicted the cycle of escalating revenge – a hanging for a spearing.

¹⁰¹ S. Anderson, *Pelletier: The Forgotten Castaway of Cape York*, Melbourne Books, 2009.

what is now western Queensland, but is less often characterised as an instance of arrogant settlers ignoring the proffered aid of the Yandruwandha people.¹⁰² The wreck of the barque *Stefano* off Western Australia's mid-north coast in 1875 resulted in 16-year-old Miho Baccich and 20-year-old Ivan Jurich being rescued by Yamadji people inland of the coast.¹⁰³

In each of these instances, the rescue is also notable for the fact that the encounter constitutes an unprecedented meeting with the Indigenous groups concerned. And immediately upon recognising that the power dynamic is reversed in favour of the Aboriginal group, it also becomes apparent that the ethnicity of those rescued is more diverse than historical stereotypes might suggest: Pelletier came from the village of Saint-Gilles-sur-Vie on the French Atlantic coast.¹⁰⁴ Although William John Wills was an Englishman, his leader Robert O'Hara Burke was an Irishman who served in the Austrian army and the Irish Mounted Constabulary.¹⁰⁵ Miho Baccich came from the Dalmatian coast of modern-day Croatia¹⁰⁶ and Jurich was also believed to be Croatian.¹⁰⁷

This subversion of the stereotypical 'first contact' story seemed particularly pronounced in the case of the *Sydney Cove* survivors, and given the extraordinary antiquity of the incident (according to Nash, "the *Sydney Cove* is the eighth-oldest shipwreck in Australian waters and the first merchant vessel lost after the establishment of the colony of New South Wales"¹⁰⁸) I felt it could serve as a demonstration that first-contact stereotypes, at least when deployed as narrative devices, are often suspect.

The Shortcomings of Language

In revisiting the past there is a problem not only of identifying the inherent traits of a land fundamentally altered and people long dead, but also of finding the corresponding tools in contemporary language with which to give them expression. Any language, and especially English, both enriches and impoverishes itself with the passing of time. Words are devised to account for technological advances; words are lost as their uses become redundant.

¹⁰² S. Murgatroyd, *The Dig Tree* p.89.

¹⁰³ G. Rathe, *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano Off the North West Cape of Australia in 1875* Perth, Australia, Hesperian Press 1990.

¹⁰⁴ S. Anderson, *Pelletier*, p.15.

¹⁰⁵ K. Fitzpatrick, 'Burke, Robert O'Hara' in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* [website]. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/burke-robert-ohara-3116> (accessed 30 August 2019).

¹⁰⁶ P. Murray, 'Mystical Link to WA History', *The West Australian*, 6 October 2018. <https://www.pressreader.com/australia/the-west-australian/20181006/281968903634082> (accessed 30 August 2019).

¹⁰⁷ M. McCarthy, *Stefano* in Green, J. (Ed.) 'Shipwrecks of the Ningaloo Reef: maritime archaeological projects from 1978-2009'. *Special Publication No 15*, Fremantle, Australian National Centre of Excellence in Maritime Archaeology (undated): pp.115-130.

¹⁰⁸ M. Nash, *Sydney Cove*, p.3

In her essay *Environmental History and the History of Emotions*, Andrea Gaynor makes the point that environmental historians are yet to make emotion a central focus of analysis.¹⁰⁹ I would go further and say that a large part of this reticence to engage with emotion in writing of landscape has arisen through failings of language. Subjectivity leaks in when a writer's bias towards a modern vocabulary is deployed in describing the past. That bias may be unconscious or it might have its roots in the conscious desire not to discourage the reader with antiquated or clumsy forms. Either way, as I wrote *Preservation* I was constantly aware of the danger that linguistic interferences would obscure deeper truths about place, or even introduce errant notions.

The Perils of Writing

For all of my lifelong assumptions about the importance of writing – its permanence and its tendency to clarify thought – it is an ill-suited tool for discussion of oral cultures. In thinking about the contaminating or confusing tendencies of language, it is wise to consider the differing impacts of written and spoken forms.

Grant Finlay, the theologian and historian of *Palawa* peoples, has probed the intersection of Christian missionary activity and language teaching in Tasmania. In his book *Good People Always Crackney in Heaven*, he examines the way in which the teaching of writing to relocated *Palawa* people at the Wybalenna settlement on Flinders Island was tightly interwoven with the study of scripture.¹¹⁰ The established Methodist catechism was transcribed by the students onto slates as a way of learning the English alphabet.¹¹¹ Finlay quotes Penny van Toorn's observation that "writing never arrives naked", a maxim that he takes to mean it is "clothed by relationships, and the interactions of diverse and unequal participants."¹¹²

On a frontier, speech works its influence differently to writing. The Australian author Gregory Day, discussing Alan Garner's *Strandloper*, presents it as never having 'arrived' to use van Toorn's term, but to have always been present, and to be impervious to the corrupting tendencies of writing.¹¹³ He reads William Buckley's introduction of the written word to the Wadawurrung people as a harbinger of doom:

¹⁰⁹ A. Gaynor, 'Histories of Emotion: From Medieval Europe to Contemporary Australia', historiesofemotion.com/27/06/16/environmental-history-and-the-history-of-emotions/ (accessed 26 August 2019).

¹¹⁰ Finlay, G. *Good People Always Crackney in Heaven: Mythic Conversations in lutruwita/Tasmania*, Hobart, Fullers Publishing, 2019, p.3.

¹¹¹ G. Finlay, *Crackney*, p.92-3.

¹¹² Van Toorn, P. *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006. G. Finlay, *Crackney*, p.3.

¹¹³ A. Garner, *Strandloper*, London, Harvill, 1996.

The issue of the written word... and the idea that its utility could completely destroy the timely pathways of knowledge and land-lore, was perhaps at least one gulf that remained between Buckley and his Aboriginal lifesavers. If knowledge was something to be attained through certain careful techniques, like honey from a comb, if it was to be ritually developed like the shapeliness of maturing skin or the muscle of a growing arm, then time and experience, *events in the landscape*, were the true etymology of the language-creature that served as the carrier of this knowledge.¹¹⁴

Day – and by extension, Garner – argues here that the power of the written word is insufficient to carry deep knowledge: ritual, sacred, secret knowledge. Such awareness can only be conveyed, particularly in a generational sense, through direct human contact and the spoken word, whether in speech or song. Its reduction to symbols, lamented here by Garner’s fictional Wadawurrung elder Nullamboin, promises as much to cause transience and confusion in the wrong hands as to render stories permanent:

Nullamboin rubs the sand and strides off: ‘*Then all will see without knowledge,*’ he cries, ‘*without teaching, without dying into life! Weak men will sing! Boys will have eagles! All shall be mad!*’¹¹⁵

The scholarship on Aboriginal oral traditions is vast and diverse.¹¹⁶ Still, some features can be said to recur in many accounts. Spoken language, for instance, promotes the transmission of culture, the navigation of landscapes, in ways that written language cannot. Commenting on the enigmatic narratorial voice in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*,¹¹⁷ Geoff Rodoreda writes:

Her aim... is to deride non-Aboriginal knowledge systems, particularly written historical and political discourses, and to elevate Aboriginal storytelling in oral form.¹¹⁸

A spoken language requires no tablet: it is as mobile as the speaker – at least, within the confines of Country – and as much a part of a region’s soundscape as is birdsong. That indivisibility of language

¹¹⁴ G. Day, ‘One True Note? The Meaning of Sound in the Language of Place’, *Griffith Review* 63 Writing the Country.

¹¹⁵ G. Day, ‘One True Note’.

¹¹⁶ See for example P. Gwatkin-Higson, ‘What is the role of oral history and testimony in building our understanding of the past?’ in *UTS New Emerging Scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies* 2018; C. Morris, ‘Oral traditions Under Threat: The Australian Aboriginal Experience’, in *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, No.2 (July 1991); and D. M. Klapproth, *Narrative As Social Practice: Anglo-Western and Australian Aboriginal Oral Traditions*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2004.

¹¹⁷ Sydney, Giramondo Publishing, 2006.

¹¹⁸ G. Rodoreda, ‘Orality and Narrative Invention in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, University of Stuttgart 2017.

<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/download/11005/10804>, (accessed 24 July 2019).

from landscape was rendered evocatively by Barry Hill in the context of the Aranda of Central Australia in 2002: “Across Aboriginal country lies the net of language that involves the country in dance and makes the whole place glow...”¹¹⁹

The Inscribed Landscape

There is a thread that connects this idea, a ‘net of language’, and the exquisite passage used by archaeologist Billy Griffiths to set the scene for a chapter on the human history of Arnhem Land:

The stony, faulted plateau – home to some of the oldest surface rocks on earth – is also one of the world’s most flammable landscapes, yet in the cold depths of the chasms and gorges, remnants of rainforest survive, protected from fire for millennia. The great cliffs of the escarpment divide the rugged plateau from the sweeping plains below. In the wet, the plains shimmer with fresh water and birdlife, fed by rivers flowing from the stone massif above.¹²⁰

And shortly afterwards:

To the Aboriginal Australians, it is an inscribed landscape, shaped by the movements of totemic beings and pulsing with the life force of the Dreaming.¹²¹

From a ‘net of language’ to an ‘inscribed landscape’: both expressions point to the same central truth – that the land functions as a document, and that document records like a seismograph the tiny flutters of the human psyche. The question inevitably arises: what happens when subsequent human activity – development, industry, biological interference – overlays the document, rendering the idea of landscape as a palimpsest? Can what is written – “written in the heart”, to quote Midnight Oil,¹²² be altered or even erased? In my writer’s eye, the horror that lurks in this idea explodes into the open in our profoundest insults to the land: a vast dam, an atomic test, or the callous destruction of Juukan Gorge.¹²³

If an inscribed landscape can be violated in such ways, the logical corollary would be that our choices of language inflict similar traumas on meaning. First Nations people have pushed back against this

¹¹⁹ B. Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, North Sydney, Vintage Books 2002, p.42

¹²⁰ B. Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Books, 2018 p.146.

¹²¹ B. Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming*, p.146.

¹²² *Written in the Heart*, (Hirst, Moginie and Rotsey) from Midnight Oil’s ‘Place Without a Postcard’, November 1981.

¹²³ P. Kerr, ‘The inside story of how Juukan Gorge was lost’ in *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/companies/mining/the-inside-story-of-how-juukan-gorge-was-lost-20201210-p56mih>, (accessed 27 February 2021).

linguistic violence. The Yugambeh poet Lionel Fogarty works to “break English and the powerful position it holds as our nation’s official language”¹²⁴:

Sometimes I don’t think
To write I have to use
a medium
that is not mine.
If I don’t succeed, bear with me.
I see words beyond any acceptable meaning
And this is how I express my dreaming...¹²⁵

In evoking the traditions and struggles of Aboriginal people in and against English, writers are compelled to jam concepts into a rigid framework: vowels and consonants, nouns and verbs. Punctuation that allows for the phrasing of Anglophones. Spelling that struggles vainly down the generations to capture the phonics of the original speakers: the reputed ‘last surviving Tasmanian Aborigine’ is known variously as *Trugernanner*, *Trugernena*, *Truganina*, *Trugannini*, *Trucanini*, *Trucaminni*, *Trucaninny*, *Truganini*, *Trukanini* and *Trugernanna*.¹²⁶ All of these stand aside from the nickname she was given in white society, *Lallah Rookh*. All of them feel like frustrated swings at a definitive translation of the Nuenonne (Bruny Island) name she was given at birth. And of course, such approximations are everywhere in the intersections of Aboriginal Australian languages and English.

But as a novelist I am faced with the insoluble dilemma: I come wielding the language of settlers. And I am the one doing the crushing, twisting and mangling of language in trying to talk about traditional ways for a modern audience. There are agreed linguistic protocols that acknowledge this difficulty, and I used them where I could in *Preservation*. The Gunaikurnai and Yuin peoples are referred to as ‘nations’, for instance, because that is the nearest understanding we have all settled for. But does that English term capture the complexity of inter-tribal relationships and power structures in Aboriginal societies, any better than ‘spring’ describes November in the Shoalhaven?

¹²⁴ C. Nashar, ‘Lionel Fogarty’s “Tired of Writing”’, *Australian Poetry Library*, February 2013 <https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/fogarty-lionel/poems/tired-of-writing-0404001/reviews/lionel-fogartys-tired-of-writing>, (accessed 1 March 2021).

¹²⁵ L. Fogarty, ‘Tired of Writing’, *Yoogum Yoogum*, Sydney, Penguin Books 1982.

¹²⁶ This last spelling is the one used by G. A. Robinson, *Journals*, 7 April 1829, reproduced in N.J.B. Plomley, *Friendly Mission*.

These are gestures, and however well-intentioned they are clumsy ones, imported crudely into an unfamiliar context.

The difficulty of evoking unfamiliar times and places or using familiar language can be illustrated by a simple example. Consider A.J. Lees, writing here about contemporary Leeds:

A parade of gabled shops with a branch of the Midland Bank, a confectionery and the fish and chip shop was on our left; further down Roundhay Road lay Gipton Wood, a murder scene where I had been told never to go. The Clock cinema, the Olga Sheard school for dancing, the Gaiety theatre known affectionately as “the bug house,” the “knocking shops” of tree-lined Spencer Place, and the regimented terraces of houses that stretched down from Harehills and Sheepscar to the Quarry Hill flats were more distant landmarks on the road in to town.¹²⁷

It is no more than commonplace scene-setting, perhaps. But here is the same language that I use, being applied to something impossibly foreign to me (and yet still, nominally, within a ‘Western’ literary tradition). The constructions are vivid and felicitous: every ounce of the author’s guile has been deployed in conveying the scene. And yet I am left shrugging, because this place is not my place.

We select from the same collection of words, the same 26 characters, to describe both the shops and houses in 21st century Leeds and the experience of struggling through the bush of the Shoalhaven in 1797. The sound of the trees in the wind, the smell of them: the fear that others are out there in the bush, following the marks made by your broken feet, *watching*.

We know our words don’t do the job: we see it every time we relinquish old English nomenclature in favour of First Nations words: the Jardwajali’s *gariwerd* for the Grampians,¹²⁸ the Muwinina’s *kunanyi* for Mt Wellington.¹²⁹ Colour and smell, sunlight and haze all become possibilities in the shapes of these words: evocation itself is altered.

The English naturalist Helen Macdonald reflected on the pitfalls of nature writing in a recent essay, and noted, in respect of naming animals:

¹²⁷ A.J. Lees, ‘Reading the Travelogues of Percy Fawcett, Explorer of the Lost City of Z’, *Literary Hub*, 6 October 2020. <https://lithub.com/reading-the-travelogues-of-percy-fawcett-explorer-of-the-lost-city-of-z/>, (accessed 7 October 2020).

¹²⁸ Budja Budja Aboriginal Co-operative [website], <https://budjabudjacoop.org.au/about/gariwerdgrampians/> (accessed 4 February 2021).

¹²⁹ Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre [website]. <http://tacinc.com.au/nipaluna/> (accessed 4 February 2021).

...John Fowles's suggestion that the name of a creature is a 'pane of dirty glass between you and it'. (He) took righteous and blistering exception to it.¹³⁰

The same might be said of my arbitrary choice of the name for my *Sydney Cove* story (quite aside from the discussion about *telling* it). I have imported values in doing so, and I sought no-one's permission. In Fowles's terms, something is lost when a seabird is called an 'albatross' and not something else. Similarly, something was lost – and my novel was irretrievably framed by the invaders' perspectives – when the survival story was called '*Preservation*'. That 'something' is an absence, and therefore impossible to define: in creating and shaping, I have also been excluding.

The Australian historian Paul Carter asked, in discussing his own work, *The Road to Botany Bay*¹³¹:

Why did explorers name places? What I am saying... is that the act of naming didn't come after a place was found: it was actually through the act of naming that a place was delineated as having a character, something that could be referred to.¹³²

Where the Gunai Kurnai or the Yuin might identify a mountain top or a coastal headland as something that needed to be named, just as white people did, Carter argues that the settlers were *defining* areas of land and then giving them names: The Shoalhaven, The Illawarra, Coalcliffe. The inverse of that naming act is their obliviousness to landforms that needed naming in an Indigenous tradition. I am convinced that, rather than being unaware, they were they daunted by the foreignness of these conceptions and chose not to engage with them.

I can feel the foreignness while engaging in an intra-Western exchange between white male writer and predominantly white, English-speaking readership.¹³³ Even in that exchange, I can feel the inadequacy of the words, and there is yet greater audacity in trying to convey in English the world of Srinivas, or Boorigul, the young Eora girl who has taken up residence in the Grayling's scullery. Very much like imposing four strictly-bracketed seasons upon the serpentine intricacies of the Australian

¹³⁰ H. Macdonald, 'The Things I Tell Myself When I'm Writing About Nature,' *Lithub.com* [website] <https://lithub.com/helen-macdonald-the-things-i-tell-myself-when-im-writing-about-nature/> (accessed 26 August 2020).

¹³¹ P. Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, St Paul, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

¹³² P. Carter and D. Malouf, 'Spatial History', Taylor & Francis Online [website], 30 June 2008, p.173. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09502368908582057> (accessed 26 February 2021).

¹³³ This observation is anecdotal only: the Australia Council's most recent research on Australian readers does not break out data by ethnicity: D. Throsby, J. Zwar, and C. Morgan, 'Australian Book Readers: Survey Method and Results', *Australia Council* [website], March 2017. <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/australian-book-readers-24-05-592762e0c3ade.pdf> (accessed 20 April 2021).

climate, European peoples arrived on the continent with a codification of their world that they called *English*, but which has always proved deficient in explaining a new world and its first inhabitants.

Conclusion: A Dream

Early in the writing of *Preservation* I had dream that never recurred but which worried me in my waking hours throughout the project. It made no sense in literal, historical, temporal terms. Yet it seemed to distil the very essence of the emotional motivation behind the novel:

The Governor of New South Wales, Captain John Hunter, sits at a desk deep in thought. He is wearing a British naval jacket, a blue so dark it is nearly black; gold braid down the front and heavy-squared epaulettes on both shoulders. The collars of the jacket reach high under his earlobes and slope down the line of his jaw. His receding white hair is swept back, clipped neatly over his ears. The hair of any such man, in any age.

Under heavy brows his eyes seem weary, fatigued by worry. His fingers are spread on the table in front of him and he contemplates them.

The table is blond wood. There is a computer monitor to his left and a phone on the other side. The wall behind him is entirely made of glass and the view outside is of the city, highways and the vast plains stretching beyond. The office is located hundreds of metres up in a glass-and-steel high-rise tower.

Somehow, the second governor of New South Wales is carrying out his duties in a skyscraper in present-day Sydney.

A boy is escorted into the office. It is Srinivas, the Lascar manservant who was one of the three survivors of the overland trek to save the crew of the Sydney Cove. He does not speak, but the two of them cross the room and gaze out at the view.

"You cannot go back," Hunter says gently.

"I can", replies the boy. "I must. My father is out there."

"You came here from another time," says the governor. "You cannot just walk back into 1797. That door is closed forever, and your father is behind it."

A pall of sorrow descends over the two of them. The boy registers what the old man has said, feels its finality. He is right, of course. There can be no going back. He weeps abundantly, a grief-stricken child once again, and the governor watches him in helpless silence, caged in by his own eminence.

It is a simple idea to articulate, but a difficult one to fully understand: none of us can ever access the past and return with the same story as another. There is no 'one' story to find back there, and

furthermore there is no single arbiter, no ultimate authority, as to the quality of the effort. We cannot write with precision about the past because, for all of our efforts, it will not allow us entry.

While there is virtue in diligence, in striving to be cognisant of one's own biases and preconceptions and seeking to counteract them in writing, the best of these efforts only ever amounts to an approximation. On one side of the ledger, the writer veers toward humility and effacement: on the other side is a competing motivation to be assertive, to say something that has impact. The space in which the writer can do both things well is vanishingly small. But it is here among the process of patient quarrying that the real value lies. The very fact that there is no singular, perfect approach to writing the past is the same quality that makes the attempt viable. There is no monolith of 'success' towards which to strive: only a field of smaller boulders – hubris, inaccuracy, dishonesty – to be avoided.

What do I find when I create a way to do it? I find that I have written *one* idea of the past, but that every supporting effort of research and thought and drafting is capable of carrying other versions of the story, wrought by the personal experience of the writer.

Unavoidably, I am entangled in the story as its teller.¹³⁴ I am, by extrapolation, a fictional character. In grasping for the most convincing and compelling version of history that I can summon from within myself, I am deploying ever more of myself in the writing.

Which is why in the end none of us, however careful or thorough, can be said to have written history. We have written ourselves.

¹³⁴ M. Watts, 'On the Diaries of Helen Garner and the Quagmire of the Fictionalized Self', *Lithub*, [website] July 16, 2020. <https://lithub.com/on-the-diaries-of-helen-garner-and-the-quagmire-of-the-fictionalized-self/> (accessed 25 July 2020).

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