

Morag Fraser

SUBSTANCE AND ILLUSION: CROSSCURRENTS IN AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

A lecture delivered as the Colin Roderick Lecture for James Cook University at Townsville and Cairns in August 1998 by Morag Fraser, at the invitation of The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies and the School of Humanities.

I want to explore some of the ways in which Australian literature and Australian art—painting particularly—inform one another; how both art and literature can be read over time; how those readings, like distant relations, can be different yet bear traces of connection; how by gridding them together we pick up new reflections, refractions and understandings without violating the integrity of the words or images that have been laid down.

I take the analytical-comparative path for two reasons: the writings and paintings I'll be dealing with are themselves intrinsically rewarding. It would be enough to talk about them because they are extraordinary works. But put them together and what begins to emerge for me, and what I hope to be able to demonstrate, is a subtle and complex understanding of this country and its history, revealed in and through the way its settler and indigenous artists and writers have rendered it at different points in our recent history.

In other words, this is a literary and art-historical join-up-the-dots exercise that tries to get at a deeper conception of Australia, this great southern or antipodean continent—certainly a richer one than our current politics, our current state of being almost, seems to yield.

The writers and painters I've selected are all women and men of their time. Their work, from a painting by John Glover to a story by Helen Garner, dates from 1830 to 1998. That's 168 years—five or six generations. They tell the truth in their fashion, as artists do. They are explorers, not slaves to truth or fact. They don't want to nail the truth down; indeed they know that they can't. Whether born before or after D.H. Lawrence wrote his famous *caveat*, they would get its gist: "If you try to nail anything down in the novel, either it kills the novel or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail."¹

They are not all novelists of course, so let's call them simply fellow travellers with truth. In their various and individual styles they are faithful to what they

perceive around them; they're alive to the quirks and twists of life, the rough edges, the blurs, ironies and occasional epiphanies. Their art can catch and fix for us what Shakespeare's Hamlet called "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure."

I am going to look at seven painters and three writers. (The imbalance signals nothing more than the difference between the speeds of sound and light: stories take longer to read than images.) I'll call them all Australian even though many of them were born elsewhere. The salient experiences of the writing and painting I want to examine occurred here. And that in itself says something about what it means to be that curious antipodean amalgam of migrant and Australian settler.

Some of what I will have to say to you is part of an autobiographical investigation that I ought to declare now: I have for a long time been fascinated by the dynamic connection between landscape and human understanding—the way the physical environment, the natural world, bends and fashions us without our being aware of the process. There are Darwinian, evolutionary ways of expressing this idea. I am more likely, given background and training, to think about it as a process of construction and understanding of metaphor and myth. The two ways are, of course, not mutually exclusive.

Let me tell you one story to illustrate briefly what I mean. I was driving in the country north of Cambridgeshire a few years back with an old friend. He is a philosopher, a sometime actor, and Welsh. Country minded. As we passed out of the flat fen land of East Anglia into the more undulating north where the hedgerows start again on both sides of the road, he asked me if I understood that other famous bit of Hamlet: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will—"

If you remember, it comes at the beginning of Act 5, when Hamlet, in a strange new state of philosophical calm, is talking to Horatio.

"Of course I understand them," I said.

"Yes, but do you understand about the hedgerows?" he asked.

"What about the hedgerows?"

"Well, Shakespeare's native county was full of them."

"So?"

"Just take a good look at them."

It was winter so you could see the bones of the hedgerows on either side of us.

"See how the natural uprights of the bushes and trees are bent and plaited?" He leant across me and pointed, swerving as he did so.

I told him I didn't care for first hand experience of ditches. But he was right: the leaves on the hedgerow were sparse so you could trace the way the boughs were woven sideways through one another, neat as a pandanus dilly bag.

Then came the speculative lecture: Shakespeare, who knew his hedgerows, had maybe done a stint as a hewer or a shaper when he was a lad. Hedgerows were regularly trimmed by a team of two workers: a rough hewer who nicked the trunk or bough with a great knife, so that it would bend, and a shaper who turned the injury to good account by twining the branches laterally into the intended pattern so they grew into a thick shield against marauding sheep or cattle or humans. Or cars driven by Welshmen.

In other words, what I have always read as one of the grander poetic utterances of hope is indeed that, but wonderfully, it also comes out of close, practical observation of a homely agricultural practice. Espalier with an extra dimension.

So the natural world and the metaphysical world meet in the layered language of a great writer who could move effortlessly between the earth he came out of and the intellectual hothouse of the Elizabethan theatrical milieu he so dominated.

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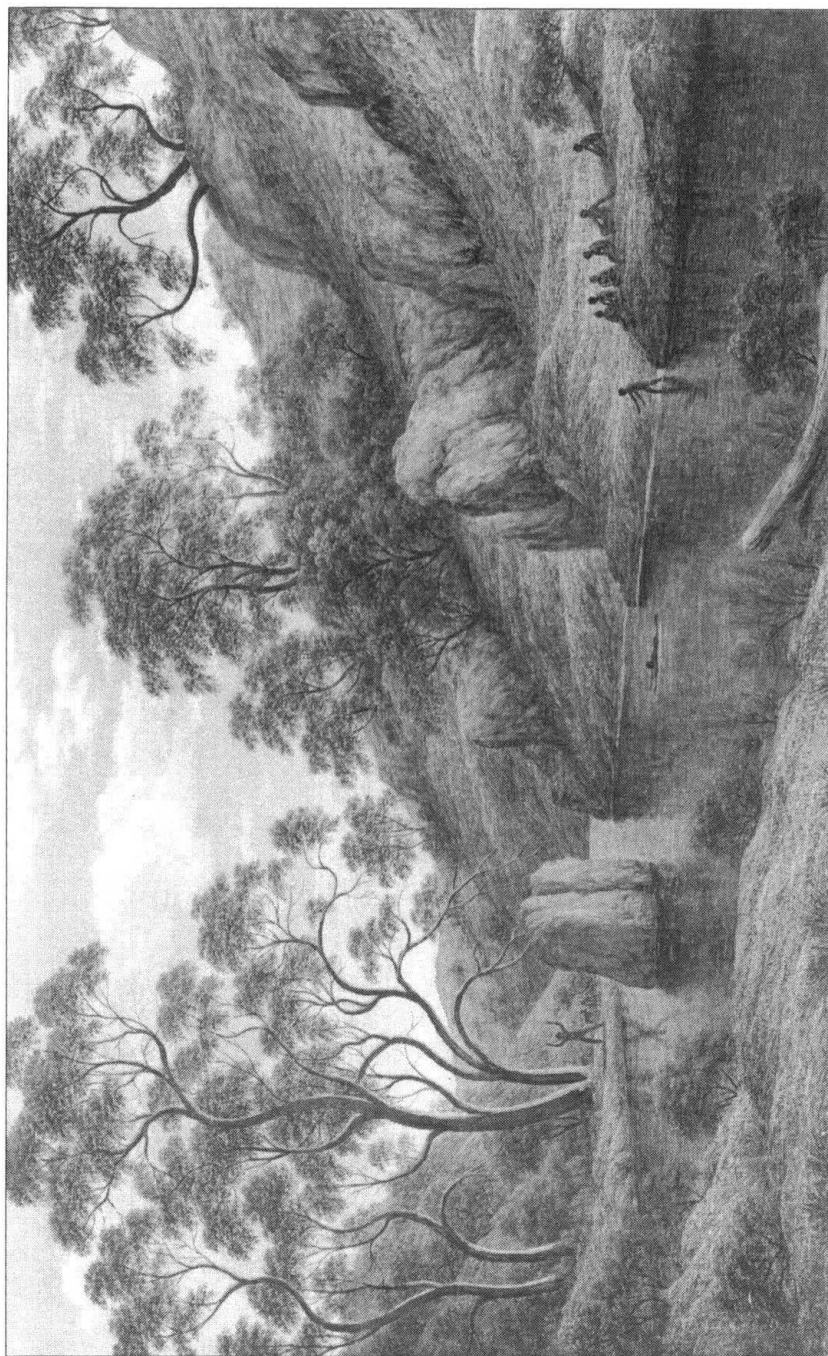
It could never have been easy for settler Australians to achieve that seemingly timeless Shakespearean intimacy with the land. We are too late, too post-industrial revolution. Now we are almost post-technological revolution. European matrices of imagination don't solve this continent for us. This really is another place. Most of us are certainly not at peace in the land, in Australia, yet: too many issues remain to be settled. I surely don't need to itemise the political and legislative battles over land of even this decade to prove that point.

So you can expect disjunctions between this land, this country that holds us and the way in which we have recorded our occupation of it. The strains show. But they are instructive, and sometimes they make that leap of imagination one has no right to expect of human beings but for which one is humbly grateful after the event. It is as though the land itself will have its demands met.

Let me show you one marvellous early rendering of this place.

It's John Glover's 1837 work called, weirdly enough, *The Bath of Diana*.

I think we now see it with late twentieth-century eyes—it looks like the landscape we know, high-gold, grass-toned in ways we recognise. Not gummed into gloomy Victorian propriety with studio varnish. It is certainly not a transplanted Turner, like this Conrad Martens of 1836.



1. John Glover, *The Bath of Diana, Van Diemen's Land*, 1837.
Oil on canvas, 76.0 x 114.0 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



2. Conrad Martens, View from Sandy Bay, 1836.
Pencil and watercolour, 46.1 x 66.4cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

Look at the light in the Martens—put robes on the foreground Aborigines and the whole effulgent picture could be picturesque Italy.

But not so the Glover. For 1837, it is extraordinary. Examine the detail—even that characteristically Australian, dead, messy eucalypt branch cluttering up the foreground.

John Glover was 64 when he arrived in Launceston in 1831. An Englishman, he grew up in Leicester; he had exhibited in the Royal Academy, also in Paris. Louis XVIII had awarded him a royal medal. Yet in his mid-sixties, he could tune his eye to a radically different landscape, a radically different light. Even those curling trees come close don't they? But for all his astonishing intensity of fresh observation, Glover was also carrying lumber. Simon Schama, in his great tome of a book, *Landscape and Memory*, remarks of the European landscape artists who went to America and wanted to paint it afresh, as a new Eden, that they were "involuntary legatees, conscious or unconscious of an ancient and persistent metaphorical tradition." They carried Europe with them in their heads. And so did John Glover.

Think about the title again: The Bath of Diana. Glover has introduced an elemental, violent Greek myth into his minutely observed, scrupulously depicted Tasmania. For a fuller analysis than mine you should look at Tim Bonyhady's discussion in the Sotheby's catalogue of April 17, 1989.² But for now, and briefly, look at the poses of the group on the bank. By one reading they are a naturalist grouping of Tasmanian Aborigines; by another, equally valid, a classic posing: the figures could have come straight off any entablature in Athens. (Try the knee-raised squat yourself—it's hellishly uncomfortable—and you'll begin to wonder at the apparent ease of the gent in Manet's famous *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863.) And behind the rock just to the left of centre—the note of alarm in this otherwise idyllic scene—is the hunter with his upraised spear poised. You have a frozen moment: Arcadia right and centre, a freeze frame of intruding chaos to the left. Dogs and spears. The elements of destruction.

In the Greek myth the hunter who interrupts the goddess Diana and her companions in their naked bathing is Actaeon, and in her fury at the intrusion and violation of her sacred space, Diana turns Actaeon into a stag and has his own dogs tear him to pieces.

Glover is painting a very complex metaphorical landscape here, blending the powerful mythic legacy of Europe and the strangeness of his new land, meticulously observed and in some ways genuinely internalised. This painting makes new sense of the old cliché "to see in a new light." Glover's "seeing" is very complex indeed. Like Shakespeare's Cordelia talking to her treacherous sisters, he sees with "washed eyes." Men and women lived in this land. Men

and women died. And once you see with Glover it is impossible to retreat into reductive balms like the doctrine of *terra nullius*. This land was inhabited, and that habitation turned to tragedy.

It seems likely that Glover arrived in Tasmania too late in fact to see any such idyllic scene—what he himself called “the gay, happy life the natives led before the White people came here.”³ He did paint other landscapes in which Aborigines occupy the land as though as of right, in corroborees, around campfires, but this one is remarkable for the fragile moment of Edenic calm it records.

This and other paintings of Glover’s (and works by other artists which I discuss in this lecture) were part of the exhibition called *New Worlds from Old, 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes*, that showed in 1998 in the National Gallery in Canberra and the National Gallery of Victoria and after that travelled to America. It was a comparative exhibition, initially the brain child of the sometime director of The National Gallery of Victoria, Patrick McCaughey. It was a marvellously revealing feat, to bring these nineteenth-century paintings from two continents together, because the conjunction enables you to see the similarities in cultural experience but also the profound difference. I’d dare to say that the challenge of Australia—this other continent at the bottom of the world, with its perpetually leafed eucalyptus, its visually undefined seasons, its dry heat and over-arching light, and the relative isolation of artists like John Glover and Eugene von Guérard, once they reached here, made for even more remarkable paintings than were produced in America. It is as though this land served as an electric shock to Glover, jolting him beyond the conventions he had inherited, the craft he had mastered, into another imaginative domain, one which made of him a better painter than he might have dreamed. And all after his 64th birthday.

At the same time as Glover was painting his incontrovertibly inhabited, wild landscapes in Tasmania, another Englishman was criss-crossing some of the same territory. His name was Mr G.A. Robinson. I want to show him to you in the account of the writer and historian Inge Clendinnen. Clendinnen is an Australian, and a justly celebrated, zesty historian of Aztec culture. She chanced on Mr Robinson late in her academic career. But let her do the talking.

This is from a fine essay of hers called “Reading Mr Robinson”:

[I] abandoned Australian History in my heart (the formalities took a little longer) in the fifth grade of primary school. To that point “Australian History” had comprised a doleful catalogue of self-styled “explorers” who wandered in what large Mrs O’Loughlin used to called “dretful deserts,” glumly littering names about (Mount Disappointment, Mount Despair, Mount Hopeless) until, thankfully, they “perished” ...

I would look at the wavery little tracks the feckless fellows had left on the school-reader map, and know I wanted nothing to do with them, or any who came after them. That avoidance has been sustained over thirty years as a professional historian ...

Or so it was. Recently, for no clear reason—the stirring times, perhaps ... —I wanted more direct access. I would do what historians always do; I would go to the sources. Or, rather ... I wanted my source somehow to come to me, to appear, like a note in a bottle, a message from another time magically tossed to land at my feet.

And so it happened. Pursuing quite a different matter, I came upon a couple of paragraphs written by a Mr G.A. Robinson. I already knew something of Robinson: that he had been Protector of the Aborigines in Tasmania in the early days, that he had been somehow mixed up with Truganini, that he had brought her to Victoria. That he affected a strange cap, like a pastry-cook gone to sea [Clendinnen has an eye like Glover's]. And that he was a foolish and arrogant man, or was I mixing him up with someone else? I asked an Australianist who was consulting me as a historical document at the time if he had anything of Robinson's writings. He had: his journal of a six-month-long trip made in the winter of 1841 from Melbourne to Portland and back, with a swing through the Grampians on the home leg ...

I had my note-in-a-bottle. I would uncork the bottle, and release the Mr Robinson held inside. I would get to know him, and he would be my guide.

... A couple of hours reading, and I knew I was in luck. Mr Robinson was a most devoted journal-keeper ... His journal will serve as a source for official reports, but it is very much more than that: it is a reviewing, a refreshment, a re-creation of his most private self. He and his journal, in whatever frail light, on those wintry nights, in those comfortless camps.

And we, you and I, reading over his shoulder.

What we read, of course, is Inge Clendinnen's reading of the revelations of a man writing 168 years earlier, a man she describes as easily flattered, more easily offended, impatient, always going on ahead and getting lost, blaming someone else, humourless, priggish, jealous and vain. But also—and this is the strength of her account—Mr Robinson, on her detailed reading, is also brave, independent and tough. He jogs off (back to Clendinnen's words) "in his fifty-first year, a portly, high-coloured person (he rides with a leaf between his lips to protect them from sunburn)."

Robinson, the Protector of Aborigines, has come from a Tasmania where Actaeon's spear is no longer poised: it has struck. And in south-western Victoria, killings have also taken place.

This is how Clendinnen tells it as she rides along with Mr Robinson:

These are desperate times. Violence among blacks is increasing, between and within tribes, even within families, but it is violence between blacks and whites that he dreads. Rumours flicker ahead like marsh-fire: they must be tracked down and scotched, or many blacks might die. He can seem absurdly partisan. Whatever the fall of the evidence, he favours the natives. If sheep are missing, wild dogs did it, or the shepherds let them stray, or exchanged them for access to a black woman. A shepherd speared through the walls of his hut as he sleeps must have provoked the attack. He believes such men, "the sweepings of NSW and VDL [Van Diemen's Land]," to be capable of anything, and if their gentlemen employers might have little stomach for casual killings, they know the value of sheep hauled stiff and seasick from the bowels of ships, or walked overland from Sydney. They are too valuable to fetch up filling a native's shrunken belly. It is difficult to identify the shadows fleeing from the sheepfolds, difficult to identify them among the stringy figures down at the river camp. Best be rid of the lot: clear them off and keep them off, and if you have to use a few bullets to do it—well, so be it. Robinson can see, in the silence of deserted habitations, in the faces of the frightened survivors, how close the settlers are to success. The signs are everywhere. At one of the few stations where blacks are still tolerated, a large swivel gun stands mounted at the homestead. Travelling through a specially tense region he makes only one entry for the day, but that is enough: "All the shepherds I saw today have double barrel guns. The natives say, 'by and by no good.'"

It's a stark narrative, riveted together by a determination on Clendinnen's part never to simplify, never to confuse single events with overall cause. Sometimes you can see the great plates of two cultures grinding against one another. Sometimes the tragic intersection comes down, mundanely, to sheep, as here in this passage.

Sir Thomas More summed up the human agony attending the great land-grabs of sixteenth-century England in a masterly image: "Your sheep, that were wont to be so meek and tame, and so small eaters, now ... become so great devourers, and so wild ... that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves." Three centuries later, we watch that perversion in nature being re-enacted in an English colony. Two peoples whose interests are perfectly inimical are in contention for the land. The Aborigines are the weaker; they will go to the wall. Astonishingly, no clear provision is made for them: they are cast out of their territories to die. That much is cruelly apparent from Robinson's own writings. So how to explain that casual, shocking comment? What is wrong with this man? Is he a fool, a hypocrite, a moral imbecile; another thick-skinned imperialist playing bumbo with a wincing world?

Again, the careful historian forestalls the reductiveness that has got us into so much strife—the urge to simplify or hide behind morally simplistic formulations:

I think he is none of those things. Rather, he (like so many others) has contrived ways to live with the appalling, immutable fact of Aboriginal death. Initially, his brisk tone, his lack of introspection, his radiant vanity, had led me to think him a straightforward sort of chap. That was, as it always is, hubris: "simplicity" in humans is a reflex of distance. How many of us dare to pretend to understand those to whom we stand closest? (How terrible the punishment of those who do.) I have come to think Robinson lives in the stretch of a terrible contradiction, the tension of the stretch being betrayed in persistent patterns of conduct—for example, that compulsive "going on ahead"⁷—and equally persistently, if more subtly, in certain oddities of style. As I read, I was more and more struck by disjunctions not adequately explained by appeal to the "journal format": too-abrupt transitions between subjects, irritable returns to matters done with, radical switches of mood. ... I have come to think that these judderings, along with his irritable, urgent energy, are indicators of what we used to call "cognitive dissonance": an uncomfortable condition in which a mind veers and twists as it strives to navigate between essential but mutually incompatible beliefs.

That is where we are now, is it not? In dissonance, trying to evade memory, to duck the past that isn't, strictly, our responsibility, but with which we are connected.

Clendinnen itemises the tragic contradictions:

The law is the blacks' only protection: the law grants away their lands, and fails to protect them from wanton, most deliberate murder. The "Chief Protector," for all his posturings and protestations, can effect nothing. The Chief Protector is a sham.

These are unendurable truths. So he keeps himself busy: he quibbles and quarrels and shifts the blame, lectures stiff-faced settlers, pats the patting black hands, hands out his blankets and his cards. He is hopelessly divided: scanning the land for kangaroos, he is simultaneously assessing its potential as pasture.

The sheep keep recurring, as they will in other writing, other paintings, sheep as a symbol turned upside down.

He strives to gather up his wandering people like some Old Testament prophet in flight from catastrophe. But the catastrophe is all around him, and there is no Promised Land.

Clendinnen's final appeal in this extraordinary double voyage is an appeal to memory and to memory's transformative power. Remember, and you can change. Forget, and all is fixed in bones and stone.

This is her concluding paragraph:

Across a landscape transformed by our meeting I look back to Mr Robinson. He is riding through a cold rain. A figure runs beside him, running easily over the land. He is young, and strong, but he is already a ghost. Perhaps he knows that, because as he runs he names the places of this, his country. Measuring his breath to his stride, he sings its names and its beauty. It is possible that this white man will hear, and hearing, write. It is possible that someone, some day, will read and remember.

It is not easy to make the transition from that stark history telling to the radiance of Arthur Streeton's *Golden Summer*.

An Australian icon, as we say. Painted in 1889, near Eaglemont in Victoria (you'd know the area as Heidelberg, hence the Heidelberg school). It's just a few miles or kilometres along from where I live. And in high season the land really does still look like that, although the young lad in the corner, right, might now have a cap on backwards instead of the traditional hat. This is one of the most important paintings of the period that saw the full flowering of Australian Impressionism, when the art-studio city men (and a few women) went out bush—not very far, about as far as Henry Thoreau ventured to get to his famous Walden Pond—and really did not that light and air, unconstrained by Europe or even by what their European contemporaries were doing. *Golden Summer* was understandably the painting at the heart of the NGV exhibition, called *Golden Summers*, which kindled a fascination with the Australian Impressionist painting that has not died down since.

Look at those sheep. This is triumphantly an Australian painting, but in a pastoral mode that has been translated from European and classical predecessors. And always the sheep, the meek animals that drove the dispossession of a whole race.

Kerryn Goldsworthy is a South Australian writer. Listen to her sheep story, written 97 years after Streeton painted *Golden Summer*. She records an even earlier, and very different kind of summer. Keep the Streeton in your mind's eye while you listen to Goldsworthy. This is from an essay called "Comfort In Arrears":

The cemetery in the small South Australian coastal town of Port Vincent is directly across the road from the white beach where I learned to swim, in the hot December of 1961. On a long and narrow patch of land, the cemetery runs along the roadside parallel to the shore; for a little way it's sheltered from the wind by a line of big old black-looking pine trees, untidy but comforting. One of the oldest monuments stands over a grave that seems too big for just one coffin; the slab over the grave is lichen and cracked, but the lettering on the granite headstone is all too clear. "SACRED," it says,



3. Arthur Streeton, *Golden Summer*, Eaglemont, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 81.3 x 152.6 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

To the memory of Augustus Craigie
Aged 43 years,
and of his eldest Son, Augustus Craigie,
Aged 10 years.

Who were burnt to death in the scrub at Surveyors Point,
Yorke Peninsula, on Monday 20th Decr. 1869, whilst
endeavouring to save a flock of sheep in their charge,
the property of Mr. Goldsworthy.

Leaving a widow and four children
to mourn their loss.

Summer after summer I swam unknowing in the clear water across the road from this story. The Mr Goldsworthy in question, my great-great-grandfather Stephen, came to Australia from Cornwall at twenty-one, an age which suggests the possibility of disagreement with his parents about the advisability of emigrating ...

On the day of the bushfire Stephen Goldsworthy was forty-three, the same age as his shepherd, Augustus Craigie. With his own eldest son, John, Stephen was on his way to help the shepherd, coming in a horse and cart from thirty miles away, through uncleared scrub and bushfire smoke. Just up the coast from where the Craigies died, the fire closed round Stephen and John and forced them over the twenty-foot cliff and into the sea; the cart caught fire and had almost burned away before the horse came crashing down behind them. As red-hot leaves and branches rained down from the top of the cliff they ducked under the water and came up for air amid burning debris, helpless to do anything about what was happening further down the coast. The horse, miraculously, did not die; but there was no saving the 1800 pregnant ewes, and there was no saving the Craigies.

The shepherd lived, conscious and lucid, for two hours after he was found. They bathed his burns with the remedy of the times—kerosene—and chunks of cooked flesh came away with the cloth. The roasted body of the child was discovered, among hundreds of blackened sheep carcasses smelling horribly of mutton, by his mother.

The story puts out untidy narrative tendrils that disappear off the edges of Page Two of the *South Australian Register* for December 23rd 1869. Stephen, it seems, got out of the water, looked at the dead, surveyed the blasted landscape and the wasted livestock, looked in on his wife Elizabeth, and set off alone on foot back into the bush to find the nearest magistrate, someone who could officially record the deaths and perform the inquest ...

The Craigies died a little way inland from the cemetery. Looking at the surrounding countryside it's hard to imagine how a fire this murderous could start or grow, hard

to imagine what would feed it; for that wheat-and-barley district now, though gold in December and green in June, is largely a treeless and denuded moonscape, and for its part in this also, my family must put up its hand. On a day in winter when the town is very quiet, when the yachts and visitors have gone and the beachfront kiosk is closed and the playground empty, when no car passes and no dog barks, you can almost, if you stand there at the graveside for long enough, hear the screaming of the terrified horse. You can't hear the Craigies above the noise of the fire and for that you are thankful. But on the stone the Craigies speak and do not cease to speak.

My grandfather, typing carefully at his desk in 1955 in the isolated farmhouse where my father was born, a few miles northwest of the Craigies' grave and a few miles north of Stephen's, wrote out this story for my father, as part of a painstaking document he titled "Old Pioneers." His main concern in compiling this record seems to have been to remember and honour the dead, and to ensure that his descendants did the same; his main source seems to have been the *South Australian Register*, the nineteenth-century Adelaide newspaper, whose archives he must have taken considerable trouble to consult and from which he must have copied large patient tracts in his late-Victorian, post-copperplate hand. The document contains not just the story of the Craigies but a number of other things, including a list of carefully preserved words from the language of the Aboriginal tribe of the area, and a list of the diseases which, by the time my family first arrived in 1847, had already all but wiped out the tribe, courtesy of whalers and sealers and sailors, seaborne and unresisted.

His tone about everyone—the Craigies, the Aborigines, his own grandfather—is the same: respectful and a little bit sad. He was a farmer and an RSL stalwart and a true-blue Liberal voter and it was 1955, but he seems to have had no trouble acknowledging the ambiguous nature of the family's history, and was, indeed, at pains to write it down. It is quite clear, partly from the contents of the document but mostly from the fact that he felt moved to write it, that he understood precisely the degree to which his own very modest prosperity was grounded in the deaths he was recording ...

Since I began to write this I've spent an afternoon in Adelaide's Mortlock Library. I wanted to look at the *South Australian Register* for December 23rd 1869, to check my grandfather's source and see if he left out anything I would have put in. All he left out was the atmospherics—the *Register* tells of the blistering heat that day, and the northerly gale ripping up trees by the roots—but then he wasn't really the atmospheric type. What does seem to have struck him is the dramatic intersection of individual ordinary lives with the forces of history and nature; maybe this was something he'd already learned about in 1917, fighting in the trenches.

Sitting in the library peering at the tiny print on the screen of the microfilm reader, I felt closer to him than I ever did while he was alive, wondering if anyone else but me

had looked at those pages since he did in 1955. I'm curious about what he thought he was doing, and about whether he dwelt—as surely he must have done—on the day of the fire and the things that happened in it, and about what drove him to write it all down. And I'm wondering what that thoroughly decent, hard-working, hat-wearing, easily-shocked old digger would think about being derided as a black-armband historian, forty years later, by the people whose side he thought he was on.

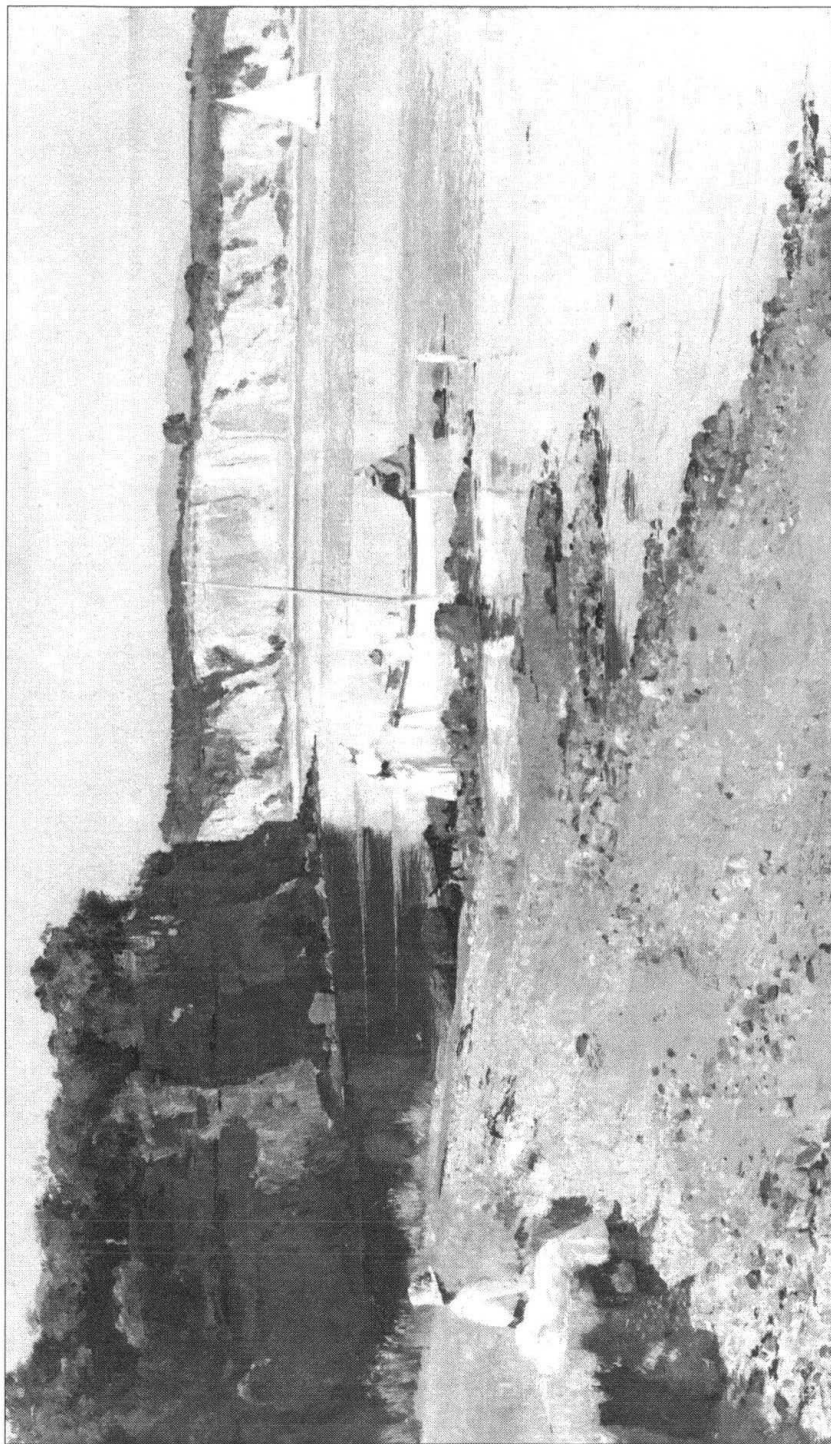
Goldsworthy hardly needs my commentary. Like Clendinnen, she writes in the cleft of memory—under the sway on Mnemosyne, goddess of memory, the goddess who requires that one render account. Both writers follow in a line carved out by Judith Wright, who has documented at length in her two complementary prose works, *The Generations of Men* and *The Cry of the Dead*, the great pastoral migrations of the nineteenth century, and their consequences—sometimes tragic, sometimes triumphant—for her own kin and for her Aboriginal predecessors. Read them if you have not already. They are a part of the indispensable records of Australia.

Kerryn Goldsworthy swam innocently just across the road from the records of tragedy at Port Vincent. As a child I swam each summer just off the beach on Port Phillip Bay that Tom Roberts catches in one pellucid moment in *Slumbering Sea*, Mentone 1887.

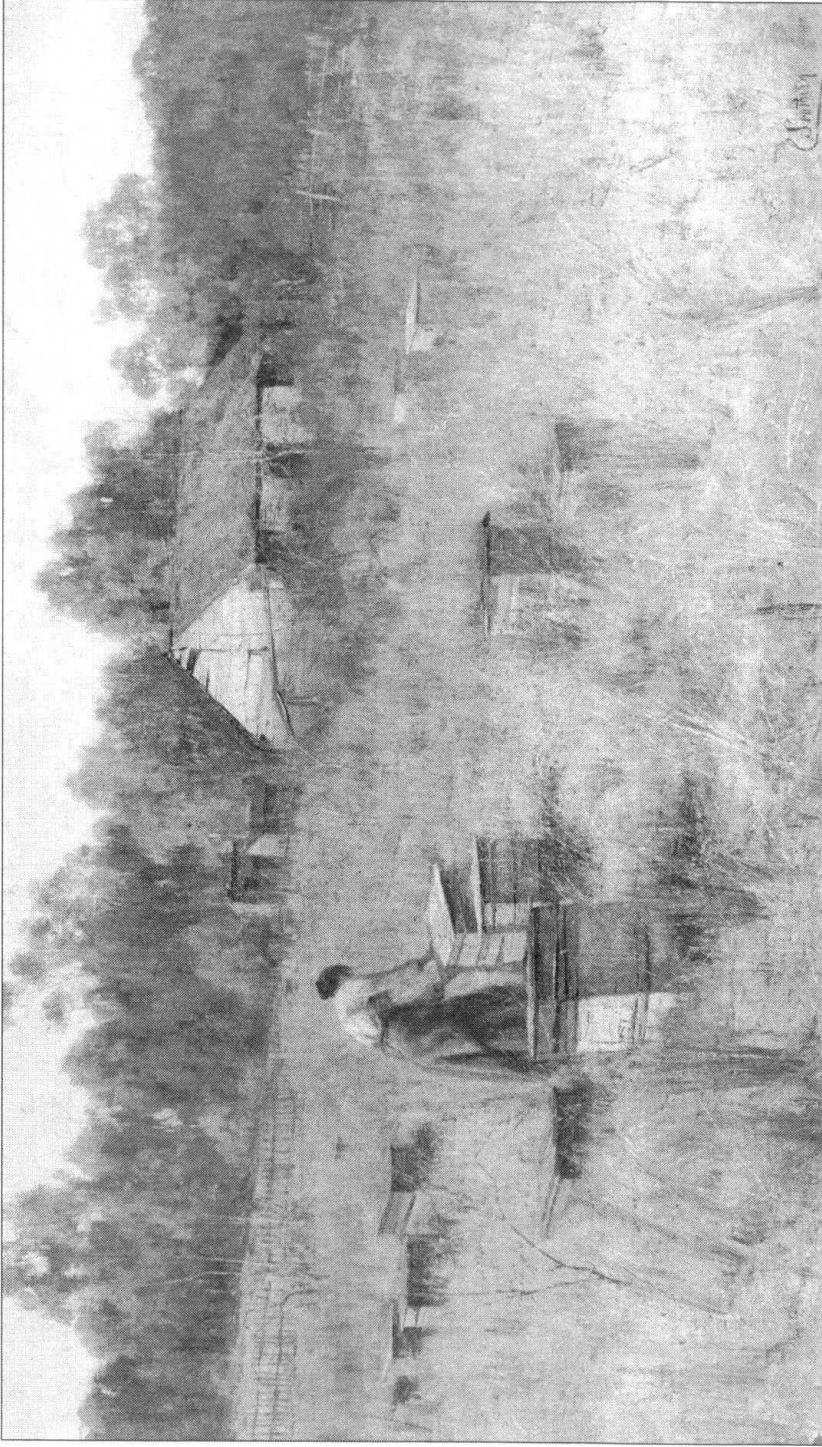
I came 50 years after Tom Roberts and certainly never looked as spry and decorous as his young women in their muslin and bonnets and waists cinched into a black line artfully echoed by the rim of the dinghy. By the time I came to spend my summers on the beach there was an old frigate—a machine of war called *The Cerberus*—sunk as a breakwater just around the bluff and within swimming distance of those of us who were foolhardy enough to clamber on to it and risk tetanus when we cut our feet on its rusty metal.

But the Tom Roberts is eternal summer, oblivious of war or menace of any kind. No wonder the nuns in my convent hung a reproduction of it in the hallway that led to the front parlour: it was a fragment of glittering innocence, life for young ladies as it was supposed to be. And in the face of the painting, who would complain?

The artist Clara Southern painted another pastoral image early this century, this one in a different mood, and called “An Old Bee Farm.” Southern first painted it in Kew, Victoria, in 1900. The painting was changed in response to the landscape as she moved further out. It is in some ways a conventional painting: the woman in the landscape, held safe but also confined by a fence, the iconographic motif that consistently hems in women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century painting. The woman is bent over her bees. Bees, sheep, domestic routine. Picturesque.



4. Tom Roberts, *Slumbering Sea, Mentone*, 1887.
Oil on canvas, 51.3 x 76.5 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.



5. Clara Southern, *An Old Bee Farm* c. 1900.
Oil on canvas, 69.1 x 112.4 cm. National Gallery of Victoria.

Helen Garner, writing 90 years later, is still a woman in a landscape, but listen to the change of tone. This is from "Three Acres More or Less" in *True Stories*. I like it particularly because it both conforms to and subverts stereotypes. Here, the quintessentially urban writer has gone bush. But is freedom or constraint to be found there? Listen to it:

Should the eagles cruising on lofty air train their stern eyebeams down this way, they would see a puppet jerking pointlessly, trotting here and there, always on the move. This is me on my land. The *three acres, more or less*, as the title puts it, which I own to the *depth of fifty feet*, must thus be crisscrossed like the dirt of a mustering yard with the marks of my anxiety. Walking is easy. The hard thing is sitting still.

To get here, you travel across a landscape of volcanic plains. As a teenager dragged out on Sunday drives, I saw it as an endless stretch of colourless nothing which perfectly manifested my dismal inner state. Now, thirty years later, I see the cleanness of its lines, its puritan bareness and simplicity, the tremendous sweep of its low horizons. It is a weary, purified landscape, unambitious, worn smooth, covered in short dry grass the same colour as the sheep that eat it.

But at certain points the impersonality of the open, sheep-coloured plains becomes secretly complicated, crinkles briefly into more intimate creases in which a parcel of land like mine, once an orchard till the Apple and Pear Board standardised things and the unprofitable trees were uprooted, can be clung to by some stubborn old coot and preserved as personal though everything around it becomes state forest.

My three acres are on the side of a gully let into this rolling smoothness like a placket into a skirt, a modest echo of the wider, deeper, more twisting valley nearby in the bottom of which the Moorabool River, narrow and stony, slaves unconvincingly towards the Barwon. My gully is the bed of a creek which once probably slaved, too, to reach the Moorabool; but this creek has been dammed to make a little ornamental lake that I call "the bottom dam," though its water is for looking at and not for pumping, drinking, washing or sailing. Below the dam wall is a stretch of mown grass with a couple of old apple trees left standing. I can't help thinking of this as "a meadow," although I know this is a European word, a European phenomenon. Not only that, I think of it as a Russian meadow, and I have never been to Russia.

If I sit still, and if the wind is blowing from the east, I can hear the Moorabool toiling hopelessly among its stones. I shouldn't say "toil," I shouldn't say "hopeless." It's just a river flowing.

The place for sitting still is a bench that someone has left under the olive tree. I'll go down there in a minute, to the spot halfway along the gully rim, from which I can see the old rowing boat lying in the grass, and I'll sit still; but first I have to tramp up

into the bush to collect some firewood, and walk to the top dam to check its level and the condition of the pump ...

If I sit still, my gaze comes to rest on the shifting treetops on the other side of the valley.

No matter how I squint and tilt my head, it is plain that the top dam is losing water. The earth here is shaly, yellow and hard; fissures are natural to it, and are encouraged by the roots of trees planted on and below the dam wall. Rabbits have tunnelled into the wall, their pellets give them away and when my father, arriving without warning from Geelong at 8 a.m., spots their droppings and the cracks made by the tree roots his mouth twists in scorn and he turns away to inspect the runoffs.

"What is a runoff?" I ask humbly, standing behind him with clasped hands.

He points. "How the hell did you think the water got into the dam?"

"Oh," I say, with the foolish giggle I despise in others, "I thought it got filled from the—from the raining sky."

He plunges away to the house, where I make a cup of tea and he tells me that frankly the dam is probably beyond repair and furthermore the place is a firetrap, that no one would be fool enough to insure it, that kero lamps are lethal, that the gutters are almost certainly choked with leaves, that if I went for a walk after dinner leaving the door ajar a draught could cause a flare-up and next thing the hut would be a raging inferno. As he speaks the cabin fills with huge noisy blowflies attracted by the smell of the shanks cooking.

After our tea he declines to go for a walk, saying he can see the eagles quite nicely from here, and sits with upright spine on a chair on the verandah, staring out over the gully. I take the blunt hedge-clippers and hack away at a part of the garden out of his line of sight, though from where I'm crouching I can hear the busy fidget and swagger of rosellas along the guttering where they are no doubt proving him right about its unkempt state, eating the grass seeds that have congregated there: but I wonder whether the pleasure of being right again will prevent him from losing his breath at the sight of the rosellas, whose feathers compress colour into essence and bring it squirting up into the senses from the depths of the mind.

I return with a bunch of very early violets. He must have seen the feathers for he consents to hold the flowers in his large blunt hand and even to have his photo taken in that pose. Then, departing, he says in a low voice, "I could live in place like this, you know; but Mum wouldn't have a bar of it." Later, in town, I get the photos back and there he stands against the verandah rail, contemptuous as a farmer, head back, eyes slitted; but in his coarse paw the tiny bunch of violets.

Three images stand out: first, the narrator's anxious, but physically fine-grained sense of her own land, "preserved as personal," as she puts it; second, the pivot in the narrative where nature wins and launches both father and daughter into a tacit but nonetheless exuberant communion with place and with one another—"the sight of the rosellas, whose feathers compress colour into essence and bring it squirting up into the senses from the depth of the mind"; and finally, "the tiny bunch of violets" in her father's coarse paw.

The Garner narrator is in the process of internalising, beginning to cherish and own an austere land. And share it.

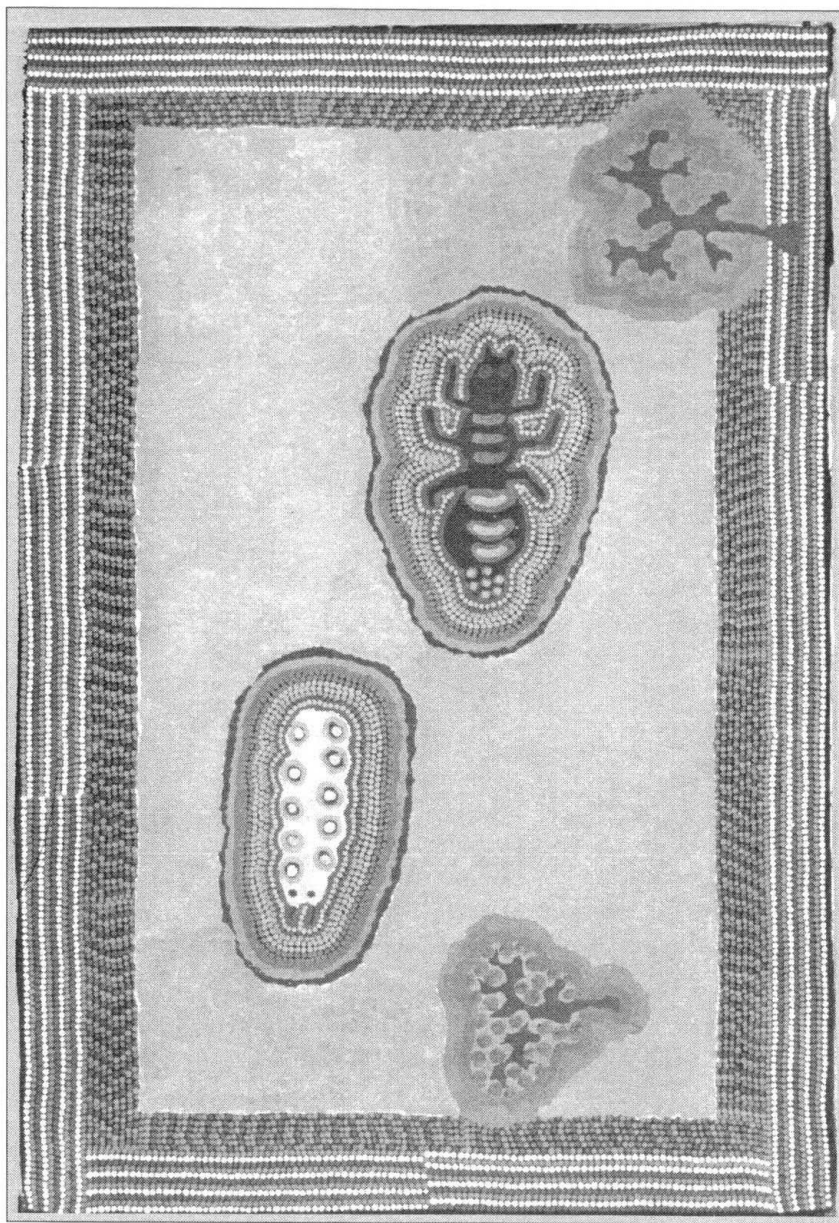
Now shoot an arrow from Helen Garner's volcanic Victorian plain, across South Australia, up into the Northern Territory. Then travel about 100km west of Alice Springs, to a place called Haast's Bluff, or Ikuntji.

Here are two paintings which, to adopt Garner's terms, behave like rosellas—they "compress colour into essence and bring it squirting up into the senses from the depth of the mind."

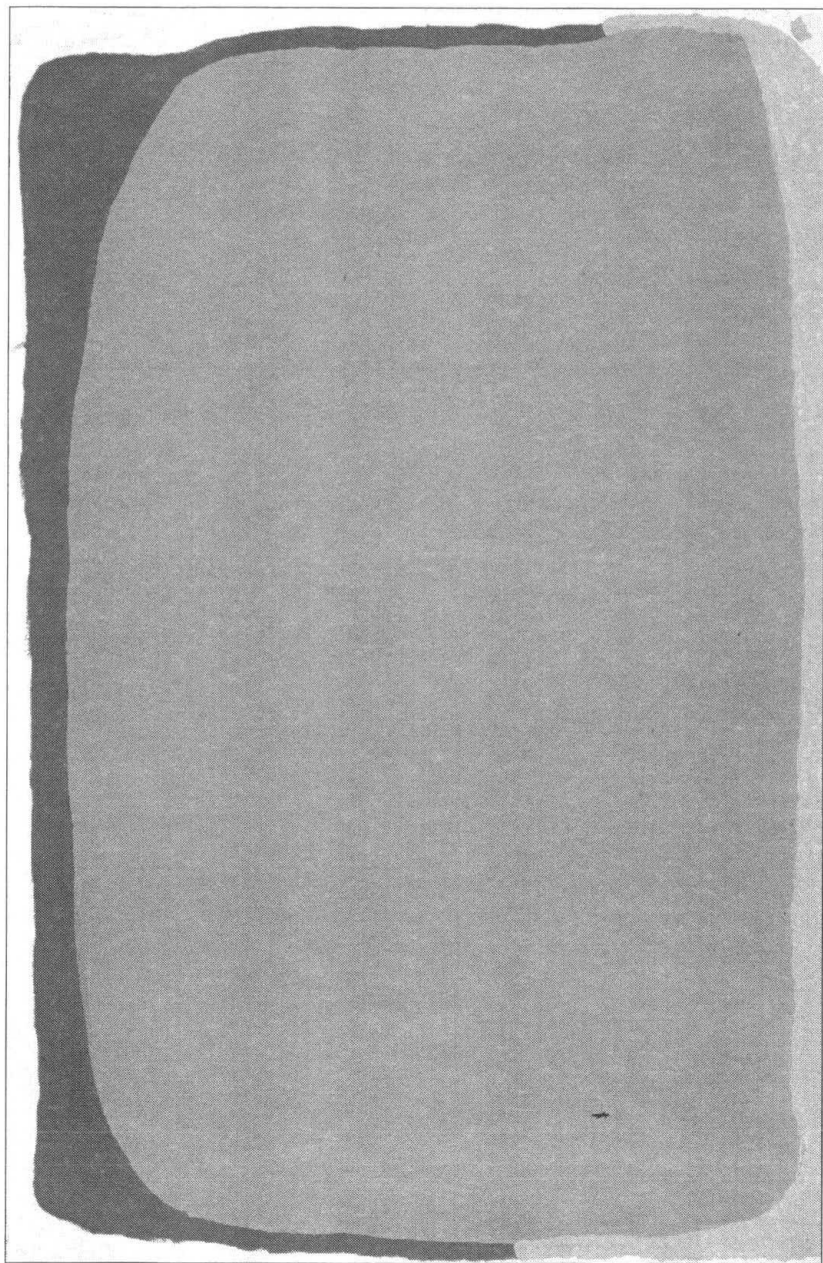
Daisy Napaltjarri Jugadai is a youngish woman, related to the Papunya Tula artists—you can trace the stylistic origins in the bordering dots of paint. This is triumphantly a painting of her country, seen from above—the "cruising eagle's" view, as Garner phrases it. (In her painting she moves easily between this and the frontal view more familiar to European eyes.) What is extraordinary about this painting and her others, from whatever view, is the way nature is so wholly internalised, and its rendering so uninhibited. For western eyes like mine it is a crazy painting to live with, a constant challenge. I have to keep asking what is this place, these rockholes, these creatures? How does this woman come to deal so easily with them? And what I learn, I learn by looking.

Finally, another painter, again from this part of the north-west Australian country.

Long Tom Tjapanangka comes from Lupul in the Frederick Range, about 200km west of Ikuntji. He worked as a stockman and police tracker around Papunya for some years and then began painting, with one of his two wives, Mitjili Napurrula, in 1993. Like a number of the Ikuntji painters, he has become something of a sensation, in his case for his pared down, huge shapes. ("Landscapes" is an awkward term here.) This is just one of many paintings he has made of Uluru. What is clear from it is how decidedly it is *his* rock; he kneads it like plasticine to fit his mood or the shape of his paper. And yet it remains Uluru.



6. Daisy Napaltjarri Jugadai, *Rockholes*, 1995.
Oil on linen, 92.5 x 135 cm. Collection of the author.



7. Long Tom Tjapanangka, Uluru, 1995.
Acrylic on paper, 70.5 x 104 cm. Collection of the author.

I met Tjapanangka a few times in Darwin. The most memorable meeting took place in a Darwin restaurant. Before that we had all talked painting sitting under trees or on the beach. This time five of us—four women and Long Tom—went out to eat.

The restaurant was pricey, the service determinedly slow. It took the waiter twenty minutes to uncork our wine. The proprietress was elaborately coiffeured and very frosty. Long Tom kept his hat on. His wife Mitjili did not speak. The walls of the restaurant were layered with photographs of the rich and famous, all shaking hands with the proprietress. There were writers, sports personalities, landscape painters, designers.

Tjapanangka, drier than the Tanami, took it all in: the rudeness, the waiter, the decor. Then he got up and, with a felt pen, began drawing emus in a lively dance up the one bit of wall left bare. The proprietress was there like a shot, but before she could evict or remonstrate or whatever she intended, Long Tom's agent, who was with us, smiled a Ruby Wax smile and beckoned the woman to our table. "I'd just like you to know," she said, "that your wall is currently being drawn upon by an important and famous Australian artist. The gentleman is Long Tom Tjapanangka and he is represented in major public and private collections throughout Australia."

She named names, places, curators. In seconds the proprietress was having herself photographed, standing between Long Tom and Mitjili, her fingertips grazing their shoulders. She sent bottle after bottle of complimentary wine to our table. When I left, Long Tom, back at the wall, was diversifying into lizards.

I am not sure whether the story ends well or badly. But the paintings are unequivocal.

*

A last word: these paintings, these stories, these essays, and my piano-wire and rubber band technique for getting them together so they can fly, are not offered as a call to action, rather to reflection. Their forced alliance doesn't lead to a political scheme or agenda or even to a big picture; but because they have such intimate dealings with memory and vision, they at the very least make it impossible for us, after seeing and reading, to deny any longer that Australia is a very complex land, home to complex people in a complex interrelation, and that the land itself is ancient, long inhabited, sacred, and a ground of new hope, if we would only dare to take it on its own terms.

Notes

1. Phoenix, 1936, "Pornography and the Novel."
2. See also *New Worlds From Old, 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p127.
3. *New Worlds From Old, 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1998, p127.

Reproductions one to five are from the catalogue to the exhibition, *New Worlds From Old, 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes*, Elizabeth Johns, Andrew Sayers, Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, with Amy Ellis, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1998. Distributed by Thames and Hudson. ISBN 0 642 13076 0 (sc).

Passages from Inge Clendinnen's "Reading Mr Robinson" and Kerry Goldsworthy's "Comfort in Arrears" are from *Seams of Light, Best Antipodean Essays*, edited by Morag Fraser, Allen & Unwin, 1998. (An earlier version of Clendinnen's essay appeared in *Australian Book Review*, May, 1995. Helen Garner's "Three Acres More or Less" is from *True Stories*, Text, 1996.