Beyond Australia's Great Divides: from Terra Incognita to Cognita

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1.

Australia is divided east from west, the coast from the rest, by a cordillera of low mountains, uplands and dissected plateaus stretching from Cape York Peninsula in Queensland's far north to the island state of Tasmania in the Great Southern Ocean. On one side of this watershed is the densely populated Pacific seaboard, on the other the sparsely populated inland. The partition is so definitive that the twain need never meet: indeed, the coastal plain and the remainder of the continent might as well be completely different countries.

In the first decades of Australia's colonial history this Great Dividing Range, as the cordillera is aptly though somewhat unimaginatively known, served as the western wall to the penal settlements of Sydney and Parramatta, an apparently insurmountable barrier both to convicts' dreams of freedom and to the expansionist demands of the colony's aspiring landed gentry. Some of the prisoners did manage to scale the wall, of course, and who knows how many disappeared forever from European society after they discovered the hidden footways through Gundungarra territory that the Eora and other coastal peoples had used for millennia to visit and trade with their neighbours and, I suspect, to flee as refugees after the First Fleet sailed into their harbour in 1788. For the colonial authorities, however, the other side of the Great Divide remained Terra Incognita until 1813, when an officially sanctioned posse of settlers and convict servants followed one of these secret routes across the mountains to glimpse the fertile grasslands and open woodlands of the Wiradjuri homelands. As one of the most rapacious of these whitefella explorers rhapsodised some years later, *The boundless champaign [sic] burst upon our sight/ Till, nearer seen, the beauteous landscape grew/ Op'ning like Canaan on rapt Israel's view.*[1] And so it was that, within months of the expedition's return to Sydney, a gang of convicts was hacking a bullock track across these Blue

[1] WC Wentworth quoted in Ernest Scott (ed), 2002, Australian Discovery, Gutenberg, ebook no. 0201001. See http://www.gutenberg.net.au/ausdisc/ausdisc2-intro.html#home, last accessed 31 October 2008.

Mountains into this 'Promised Land'. The British invasion and conquest of the other side of the Great Divide, of Wiradjuri Country, had begun.

2.

The Blue Mountains still hang like a blue-grey shadow across Sydney's western horizon, although more as a bulwark against endless coastal sprawl these days than as a prison wall. But for most east coasters—which, on this highly suburbanised continent, means eighty percent of Australia's total population—what lays beyond them remains Terra Incognita, a stereotypically hot, dry, dusty, dangerous place populated with 'bigots', 'bogans', 'battlers', venomous snakes and whingeing 'cockies' (as farmers are known in the vernacular). Unfortunately these pejoratives contain an element of truth, because once you get past the exurban comfort zone of wineries, weekenders, art galleries and baristas who can pull a half-decent shot of espresso, the climate *is* unpleasantly hot, dry and dusty in summer; the wildlife does, indeed, include some very deadly reptiles; the 'cockies' do tend to complain an awful lot about weather extremes, Climate Change and global commodity prices they have no control over; and yes, some of the locals, of whom an overwhelming majority is of Anglo-Celtic descent, have been known to express racist, misogynist, homophobic and/or xenophobic views which must be as offensive to cosmopolitan world travellers venturing beyond the Great Divide for the first time as they are to most of us locals.

Because, yes, this apparently brutish inland, this 'wrong' side of the Great Dividing Range, is home to me. It is where I was born, where I grew up, and to where I return, like a migratory bird, after each of my sojourns in other places. I love it. I loathe it. Passionately and in equal proportion. The Great Western Highway, as the bullock track across the Blue Mountains is now called, has become an old friend: my escape route when what I loathe about the inland gets too much to bear, and my road home when my longing for the big skies and wide open plains of Wiradjuri Country becomes impossible to resist. But, surprisingly, I've never thumbed a ride along this highway, not even in my hippie/student days … although I have 'hitched' its twin track across the Great Divide, the Main Western Rail which, somewhere past the last commuter service to the Blue Mountains, morphs into the Transcontinental and continues westward-ho for another 4,300 kilometres until it hits Perth on the other side of the continent. Along the way, about four hundred kms out of Sydney, the Main Western/Transcontinental Rail also happens to run through my home village and, some ten or so kms further on, passes close enough to our family farm for us to hear the clickety-clack of the rolling stock on the line and the toot-toooot of the air horns as the engines approach the level crossing at our turn-off. When I was a child I'd lie awake and listen to the crescendo and diminuendo of the long-haul diesels passing through the night and imagine myself escaping the isolation of the farm by jumping a freight wagon and hiding under a tarpaulin like I'd seen in movies. Freight trains lost their appeal as I grew older and I made my escape by safer, more comfortable means, but whenever I needed to get back to the wide open plains and big skies of my childhood I'd heave my bags into Sydney's Central Station and find an empty compartment on a passenger train heading west. Over the next six or more clickety-clack hours I'd listen nervously for the conductor's tread

along the corridor and, as soon as I heard him in the next compartment, head for the ladies' loo and wait for the danger to pass. In the 1970s impecunious young hippie/students could do that kind of thing, and some probably still do.

In the decades since then the passenger rail services to small rural communities have all but completely ceased, and many towns and villages west of the Great Divide are slowly disappearing. In our village, for example, the post office and bank have closed; the general store no longer opens; the service station doesn't sell petrol anymore; the little primary school I attended is only just surviving with 21 students, two teachers and a satellite dish; and the old railway station at which I once disembarked is now an occasional arts and craft gallery where locals sell their homemade jams, cakes and handicrafts for pin money. The only viable business left, it seems, is the local pub, and there's little reason for travellers to even slow down on the road through our village unless they need a cold beer on the way to somewhere else, or there's a hitchhiker in need of a lift. Which isn't as infrequent as you might expect, given the rate at which vehicles break down or run out of petrol in this impoverished part of the world, and the regularity with which some of the locals lose their drivers licences and/or find themselves with no other way to get to work or back to the pub. But *non*-locals tend to be very rare along our road.

Every now and then, however, a stranger thumbs a ride across the Great Divide to take the inland route least travelled. Even my mother picked up a 'foreigner' on our road once, although "very reluctantly", as she confessed to me recently. We were sitting in the back garden of the little house she has retired to in a nearby town. She was knitting as she reminisced, a snowy haired octogenarian recalling an event which probably occurred thirty, even forty years ago. She was driving from the farm into town to do the weekly shopping, she says. A car pulls up at the crossroads, the driver flags her down and introduces himself as a travelling salesman. He has to turn off to attend to his business elsewhere, he explains, but his passenger needs to get to Sydney, so could she give him a lift to the next town, please? The passenger is about thirty years old and looks "presentable enough", as my mother comments, so she lets him into the car. "But when I put my foot on the accelerator I noticed that it was shaking dreadfully", she says. "And my hands were shaking on the steering wheel too."

I can see my mother as she would have been then, a middle-aged farmer dressed in her best going-to-town frock and clutching the steering wheel as if her life depended on it, yet valiantly trying to make conversation with this stranger because that was the polite thing to do. "He was from Croatia," she tells me proudly. "I didn't like to pry into his past, but he seemed to know a lot about farming as though he came from the land like me. He told me that he was looking for work, that he'd heard there was a railway job at a fettlers camp way out way west near Mount Hope, but by the time he got there the job was gone. So now he was hitchhiking all the way back to Sydney. He was very well mannered and thanked me profusely when I dropped him off. And I thoroughly enjoyed my trip into town with him—after I got over my nerves."

Why were you so afraid? I asked. A silly question really, because I've also driven along bush roads alone and wondered what would happen if ... "Women have always been more vulnerable," my mother says, as if reading my thoughts. "A lot of women were also very shy back then." Which may

have been true, but I also suspected that my mother's shaking hands and feet had something to do with her passenger's non-Anglo appearance and his Balkan accent. "Well, country people just didn't meet foreign people in my generation," she says. "We had very few migrants out here other than Greek café owners. There weren't even many Chinese left when I was growing up. Ah Gong was one I remember. He came out to our farm when I was a child with his horse and covered wagon, and he used to go around town every day with vegetables from his market garden. And then there was Jacky Tik. My mother bought vegetables from him too. I think Jacky was given a pretty hard time by many of the locals though, especially when the war started in '39. A lot of people thought Asians were 'aliens' in our culture then."

And yes, what my mother says was true. Despite the profoundly important contributions Chinese and other non-Anglo migrants and their descendants have made to inland Australia over the last 150 years or more, they have been the victims of discriminatory legislation, boorish ignorance, and racist and xenophobic behaviour, including violence, as perpetrated by sections of the majority population. It is also true that, even today, "country people" like my mother who spend most of their lives on the inland side of this Ethnic Divide, rarely encounter "foreigners", in part because "foreigners" themselves overwhelmingly choose to remain on the other side of the Blue Mountains. Of the six million migrants who have arrived in Australia since the end of World War II more than eighty percent have settled in coastal cities and, of these, more than half now live in Sydney and Melbourne. I'm no mathematician but, given these statistics, the probability of my mother ever being charmed out of her fears and prejudices by a young Croatian hitchhiker on the way to a very monocultural inland town must be extremely low. She just got lucky, I guess. Conversely, the probability of city folk and other "foreigners" ever meeting country people like my mother who can challenge their preconceptions of we inlanders as 'bigots', 'bogans', 'battlers' and whingeing 'cockies' must also be very slim, given that so few ever cross the Great Dividing Range. And so the stereotypes, the prejudices, the bigotry persist on both sides of the frontier.

3.

But there's another even deeper schism running through Australian society, one that pitches my family of predominantly Anglo-Celtic settler-descendants on one side and the descendants of the indigenous peoples whose land we now occupy on the other. It's hard to talk about this Great Divide in rural Australia because all of us, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, are entangled in histories we would rather not remember, since we are all the descendants of perpetrators, collaborators, witnesses and/or survivors of past atrocities and injustices, or we ourselves are beneficiaries and/or victims of ongoing iniquities. Many of our shared memories remain painful, shameful and unsettling, and most of us simply don't want to go there.

In my own gallery of disturbing memories is a man called Ted who hitched and walked some seventy kilometres to our farm in the 1960s to ask my father for a job. Ted was a Wiradjuri man. He lived at the Murie, a fringe settlement beside a lagoon near the small farm on which I spent the first eight years of my life. Ted's people had camped beside their lagoon for millennia, as archeological

surveys have since confirmed, but the Murie settlement, as my mother and I remember it, emerged during the Great Depression of the 1930s when swagmen and other unemployed and homeless whitefellas built shanties on the site. When the Depression ended the whitefellas moved out and Ted's mob moved in to escape the subjugation and paternalism they had endured on the nearby Aboriginal reserve. By the time I was old enough myself to be aware of the Murie it was a settlement of some twenty or thirty improvised dwellings surrounded by neat gardens and interspersed with more makeshift accommodation, but with none of the amenities or services my relatively privileged whitefella family took for granted. "They didn't have any water laid on, the kids had to walk to school or ride bikes, and they didn't have any telephones, so they'd come over to our place to ring the police or a doctor whenever there was an emergency," my mother recalls.

From time to time Ted and his brother Paul helped my father clear more farming land on our bush block on the other side of town. According to my mother, Dad really enjoyed their company. "He would sometimes come home and tell me how they caught a porcupine [echidna] and threw it on the fire and how it smelled just like chicken, or they'd catch a goanna and cook it," she says. In the early 1960s my parents sold their river block and moved us all upstream to our present farm. Ted must have been really desperate to have hitched and walked all that way to ask for a job, but my father had no work for him at the time. Dad invited him to stay at the farm overnight though, and made a bed up for him on an old car seat amongst the lathes and welding gear in his workshop. It sounds a shameful way to treat a visitor now but, for Ted, Dad's workshop was a palace—because it had an electric light. Ted had never slept in a room with an electric light before and he left it on all night so he could enjoy the luxury for as long as possible. I remember my father telling me this story as though it were only yesterday—and the memory still burns.

4.

This Great Divide, the one between we settler-descendants and the descendants of the people whose ancestral estates we now occupy, remains the deepest shadow on the nation's horizon, a cordillera as difficult for many whitefellas to cross, it seems, as the Blue Mountains were before that bullock track was hacked from the coast to the inland. But not impossible. And so it was that this *wadjilla* from the 'wrong' side of the racial divide fell in love with a blackfella and crossed this last frontier. It happened decades ago and hardly rates a mention now, but at the time reactions to our relationship drove us ever further from our familiars, about as far away, indeed, as we could get while still remaining in Australia: to Perth, the end of the track for both the Transcontinental Railroad and the Great Western Highway.

I was working as a freelance journalist and artsworker by this time and found myself regularly heading even further from my roots to the remote Gascoyne and Pilbarra regions of Western Australia where the mythic 'Outback' meets the Indian Ocean. This is Yamatji country,[2] the ancestral estates of clans whose interactions with Europeans pre-date the 1788 British invasion and

[2] The word Yamadji means 'man' and is used generically in Western Australia to refer to the peoples whose traditional homelands are within and around the regions now known as the Gascoyne, Murchison and southern Pilbarra in north western Australia. Specific clan names are also used.

conquest of eastern Australia by more than 170 years.[3] Locals still recount intriguing stories about seventeenth century Dutch East Indies mariners surviving shipwrecks in Yamatji sea country and passing on their blue eyes and blond hair to their Yamatji children. By the late eighteenth century the Dutch ships were being replaced by American and British whaling vessels crewed by sea-hunters who were not known for their sensitivity either to migrating cetaceans or to indigenous peoples, especially indigenous women and girls. The violence and brute exploitation the whalers perpetrated was repeated by British pearlers and pastoralists in the second half of the nineteenth century, and Yamatji descendants have not forgotten this. By the time I reached Yamatji country, however, the whaling industry had been outlawed, the South Sea pearling industry had moved north to Broome, the pastoral industry was in decline, the mining industry, which now sustains the region, was yet to boom, and North West Cape, that perky little limestone peninsula poking into the Indian Ocean some 1200 kms north of Perth, was occupied by the US military. Ronald Reagan was in the White House, Yuri Andropov was in the Kremlin, and the US Seventh Fleet was protecting American interests in the Indian Ocean. The beer mats at the only pub in the only town on North West Cape caught the spirit of the time and place: 'Visit Exmouth, Australia's No. 1 Nuclear Target,' they boasted. 'Get Bombed at Burkett's Pot Shot Inn.'

On one of my visits to this No. 1 Nuclear Target I took the liberty of asking a visiting Australian officer in a sparkling white uniform whether the message on the beer mats was true. "It'd be a waste of a bomb to let it go here," he snapped. "It's just a communication station. Messages sent. Messages received. Just like any other communication station with blokes sitting at benches and lots of dials in front of them." Patronising ninny, I thought to myself, but he kept talking. "If interviewers ask anything too curly I just tell our blokes to say 'I can't answer that' and add something about National Security. That's the easiest way to stop questions," he said. Which certainly stopped me! The following morning a rather more reflective young lieutenant invited himself to my breakfast table, so I asked him the beer mat question: is Exmouth a nuclear target because of the US military presence? The poor fellow inhaled deeply then looked me in the eye. "Of course it is," he said. "But so is Sydney. So is Canberra. In the event of a nuclear war, of course Australia will be a target. Anyone who thinks it won't has his head buried in the sand."

With this threat of Mutually Assured Destruction weighing heavily on my mind, I hitched a ride with a National Parks ranger to the opposite side of the Cape to visit caves in which, I was told, Yamatji ancestors had, long before the arrival of the whalers, pearlers and pastoralists, covered the walls with paintings and petroglyphs. We drove through the great canyons and narrow gorges of Cape Range National Park along tracks that were only accessible by 4WD, and then through red pindan and spinifex country to Yardie Creek Station, part of a pastoral lease dating from the 1870s. We passed the old homestead and outbuildings and pulled up at the base of a pink limestone

[3] In 1616, for example, mariner Dirck Hartogh nailed an engraved pewter plate to a post in Yamatji sea-country after his vessel, the Eendracht, was blown off course en route to Java in what Europeans then knew as the Dutch East Indies. Two years later, in July 1618, Captain Lenaert Jacobszoon and Supercargo Willem Janszoon of the Dutch East Indies ship Mauritius stepped ashore on North West Cape. They didn't actually meet any of the locals but they saw their footprints on the wet sand and the smoke from their fires. The locals would almost certainly have seen the Hollanders, however. Over the next century dozens of Dutch ships were wrecked off this coast.

escarpment. I felt haunted as I scrambled along the rocky pathway to the cave, as if something terrible had happened in this place. The ranger interrupted my thoughts: "There's none left here now," he says. "Abos that is. A big tidal wave came and wiped them all out. A few must have been off hunting somewhere and found all the others drowned when they came back. So that's when they scribbled this bull dust in the cave and called the place taboo."

I was stunned, but there was more. Because this park ranger, an English migrant who had lived in the Northern Territory for twelve years, knew "all about Abos", he said. "People here think it's just as well we don't have any Abos on the Cape, but they wouldn't admit to being racially prejudiced. I admit that I am though. I mean, would you marry one?"

It took a long time for me to reply, but damn it, how could I not challenge this man with the reality of my own life? I drew a deep breath. "Well, actually, I live with an Aboriginal man," I say, and brace myself for his response. "You're not racist then," he admits, "but I wouldn't even want to live next to one. The full blood is OK. In the desert. But it's the half castes, and you've got to blame whites for that, I'll admit. What I believe in is complete segregation of the races. That's what they have in South Africa. I'm talking as far as marriage, mind you. In South Africa they go a bit far and won't even let them ride on the same buses. I don't agree with that. But marriage … well, I'd never marry a gin. I wouldn't even live next to one. And I won't live next to Indians either."

Decades later, as I key these words, I can't for the life of me recall anything about that cave or its artworks. I was too appalled, too upset, too dazed by the ranger's invective, it seems, to write anything about them in my notebook. All I documented were the ranger's words. I do remember the beer mats at Australia's No. 1 Nuclear Target, however, but probably only because I pinched one and still have it!

5.

The Cold War melted and we Earthlings somehow escaped Mutually Assured Destruction that time round, but what happened to the Yamatji of North West Cape? Because at least one part of what the ranger said was true: there were no indigenous people living there in the 1980s. There is also no evidence of a "tidal wave" sweeping them all away, so what really happened, and when did this non-nuclear holocaust befall them?

From an indigenous perspective the answers to these questions must seem obvious, but from the opposite side of Australia's great racial Divide the obvious can be more difficult to see—because those of us who are beneficiaries of indigenous peoples' dispossession find it hard to acknowledge that our colonial forebears, the whalers, pearlers and pastoralists, for example, were callous, bloody and brutal; or that the land we now consider our own was stolen; or that our inheritance is tainted. As for the timing of this cataclysm, documentary evidence and oral histories suggest that by 1875 many Yamatji were working under slave-like conditions in the pearling industry and on pastoral stations on and around North West Cape, although some successfully avoided whitefellas and lived traditional or semi-traditional lives in the bush. We know this because, in 1875, Miho Baccich, a sixteen-year-old sailor from Dubrovnik in what is now Croatia, and a compatriot of the young

hitchhiker who charmed my mother on the other side of the continent a hundred years later, was shipwrecked in Yamatji sea country and nursed back to health by members of the Junigudira and Baiyungu clans. Miho spent three months foot-travelling with his Yamatji rescuers before hitching a lift on a pearling cutter to the southern port of Fremantle, from where he sailed home to Debrovnik. With his family's support he recorded his adventures and, generations later, one of his many great-grandsons finally gave his story, *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano Off the North West Cape of Australia in 1875*, to the rest of the world.

Some time after young Miho Baccich left North West Cape the Junigudira and Baiyungu clans walked away from their ancestral estates rather than submit to the demands, the brutality, of the pastoralists and pearlers. They were not "wiped out" by a tidal wave, as that ranger had claimed: they fled as refugees. The descendants of these holocaust survivors are now reclaiming their homelands under Native Title legislation, and Miho's memories, as recounted in *The Wreck of the Barque Stefano*, are providing some of the evidence they need to confirm their ancestral connections to North West Cape under whitefella law. The great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren of the people who saved that young Croatian's life now own some the region's oldest pastoral stations; they are operating ecotourism businesses in their traditional land and sea country; and they are working as rangers to rehabilitate and protect the Cape and the surrounding sea-country. They are also telling very different stories from the lies I heard all those years ago.

6.

One of the privileges of growing older is being able to reflect on the many changes that have occurred within my lifetime, some of which I've been part of, and others, like those on North West Cape, I've simply witnessed, and mostly from afar. On this journey from Terra Incognita to Cognita, from ignorance to understanding, there are still many Divides yet to cross, however, many pasts to reconcile, many injustices to reverse, many prejudices to challenge, and many 'inlands' to explore. A heck of a ride and I'm never certain where my next lift will take me, but I always know to where I'll return. To 'my' side of the continent, 'my' side of the cordillera: the big skies, open plains and far horizons of Wiradjuri Country.

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