CHAPTER 1 LOSING WINDERMERE STATION

SINKING ROOTS

Margaret Johnson spent most of her youth at Narrandera in south-western New South Wales. From her birth in 1933 she was a solitary child. When she thinks of that time she recalls a sleepy town, heat and dust, birds, long summer days, walking by herself knee-deep through piles of plane-tree leaves.[1]

As a young woman Margaret Johnson travelled overseas, and on her return felt restless. Office work held no attraction. At the age of twenty-two she took a job as governess on a sheep property near Young on the central slopes and plains of New South Wales. Here was that half-forgotten but familiar *lovely smell of hot weather and dusty roads*. The following year she married Jim Johnson, the owner of a neighbouring property. The young bride saw the property's overgrown tennis court, dilapidated gravel paths, run-down gardens, horses grazing a few metres from the back door, the dark, two-storey rambling house with heavy curtains and brown blinds. She fell in love with them all, she says, almost instantly.

The property she had come to was 2500 ha of pleasant grazing country. Its name was Windermere Station; it had been held by the Johnson family since 1923. In the nineteenth century ten people had worked on it, now there were two. Except for the river flats the land was, and is, undulating to rough. Margaret Johnson thought it *really quite beautiful because it's got the hills almost on three sides and a lovely creek running down through the middle and little creeks running down into that. Quite lovely.* Out of the south west rolled the wondrous clouds. Above

the flats they were *whimsical and friendly*, on the hills they were *intimate and misty*, and when they roared over the Illuni Range they were *quite stupendous and magnificent*. In the paddocks the sky, the air and the soil were part of *the real physical tie to the land, a feeling that is part of your spirit that's divorced from all arguments of logic and reason and behaviour*. Margaret Johnson felt herself in love with *the feeling of the place, that country feeling, that feeling that you are able to exist in a place with not many people; you could call it lonely but you're never lonely. I suppose it's the spirit of the place. It's a very calming sort of feeling to be out amongst those lovely gum trees and the creek and the birds. I've always felt an affinity with that sort of place*. The days were full and rich *without you having to do very special things*. The first familiarities of Windermere were the contours and creeks; attachments deepened year by year to bonds with all the property and the special places within it. Over the next four decades, Margaret Johnson *did a fair job of knowing every gully intimately*.

How do humans form such powerful and mysterious attachments to country? The philosopher Gaston Bachelard believed that all really inhabited space bears the essence of the nature of home, that the human imagination begins to create a recognisable place wherever people find the slightest shelter, walls of impalpable shadows or the illusion of protection.[2] Humans, and apparently other mobile beings, are able and feel the necessity to turn space into place, to identify a site as in some way different from other sites, to erect mental boundaries around it, to live or work in it, or call it home. One conclusion which emerges from the enormous contemporary literature of place studies is that the ways in which humans demarcate their space are bound by the rules and customs of the cultures of which they form a part—the way in which they actually and symbolically create landscape within the cultural community probably reflects other organising principles of that society and its world view.[3] In this book I take it that anything that individuals recognise as 'a place' has been in part constructed to suit them and in part has been created by wider issues of power, group dynamics, conflicting ideologies and institutions. This shaping of identifiable sites affects both the physical appearance of places (for example, boundary fences and street signs), and the way they are conceptualised (such as 'home', 'Melbourne' or 'the bush').[4]

Who forms attachment to place? Individual variations seem as great as different cultural expressions. To the descendants of the invaders, the sense of belonging takes many forms:

> Some of us feel at home nowhere
> Others in one generation fuse with the land.[5]

Aborigines maintain a mutually sustaining relationship:

> We belong to the land; our birth does not sever the cord of life which comes from the land.[6]

Other cultures also take rootedness for granted. The ancient Romans conceived a powerful relationship between gods and the soil. A family erected its own focus, or sacred hearth fire, from which the family took root. As long as the family lasted, the household god expressed in the sacred fire was thought to possess the soil. In this conjoint relationship, both soil and family were immovable, connected to each other through the mystic fire.[7] Other cultures allow attachments to place to form and be expressed collectively and unself-consciously. The Irish have been preoccupied with the nature of place since ancient times. 'They lived off, moved across it, above all named it, with that associative and magical potency which wove it intimately into their lives.'[8] The English may be thought by the Irish to be rational, scientific, sceptical, too out of tune with the earth's vibrations mystically to bond with it—but, though collectively the love of place may form a less dominant theme in English culture, there may be many thousands of English individuals who love the English landscape but who do not find it easy to express their emotions as passionately as the Irish express theirs.

People respond individually to locality, then, and the culture with which they are familiar helps to enlarge, diminish, shape or transform it. Senses of belonging are allied to attachment and love, but the country must first become known and apprehended; as Paul Carter puts it, nature had first to be conceptualised as a place before it could be loved.[9] Cartographers inscribe maps as if the geographic features the Australian explorers stumbled upon were already there, as if rivers flowed waiting for a European to name them. But to recognise a river as a discrete, nameable geographical entity is a cultural, not a natural,

expression. There is no such thing as a 'river' until we recognise it as such and place it in the named and identified category of 'river'.

Once such entities are recognised within the meanings of the identifying culture, humans proceed to utilise the familiar geographical features for their individual purposes. Australian Christians erect churches on hills and call the ground sacred, Italian Australians declare certain springs to be holy wells, states declare their boundaries to begin at rivers. Universally recognised entities like the sun take on local cultural significance: Mena Abdullah's Punjabi father, farming on the Gwydir River in New South Wales in the 1950s, used to tell his children that the flaming sunset over the New England tableland was the glory of Allah.[10] Holy wells and an Australian Allah may seem alien to Australians of Anglo-Saxon descent, but these cultural expressions of landscape, though different from the more familiar cultural markers of pastoral property, fence, suburb and cleared land, spring from a similar human impulse. Different human cultures recognise different features in the landscape and imbue them with different cultural characteristics.

After the Australian explorers there came the generation of landholders who erected boundary fences to mark their space and territory: enclosure was essential to Europeans, Carter believed, not only to the act of settling but also to the description of settling.[11] The enclosing fence was followed by the clearing of the home paddock which, like the marked boundaries, seemed as important a symbolic act of possession as a physical necessity. John Dunmore Lang, the famous nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister, voiced the feeling of many Australians of last century:

> Yet all is wild and waste, save where the hand
> Of man, with long continued toil and care,
> Has won a little spot of blooming land
> From the vast cheerless forest here and there.[12]

Clearing meant symbolic possession, hard labour and vivid memories transmitted for generations. Mary Fullerton of Gippsland recalled:

> That was the sort of land that had to be cleared and prepared for the plough by the indomitable settlers along that whole river valley …

> [Nature] certainly had clad those flats well with tree and shrub and fern. Many an age had she laid down her sowings by the tillage scheme of gravitation, of flood waters, and all those other wonderful and inexhaustible powers of hers whereby the earth is made ready for man. And then man, to do his own sowings, had to remove Nature's, necessity stopping at no desecration, no waste. We had the privilege of seeing … of helping in the undressing of the loam, and the taking from it of man's first fruits.[13]

In this way non-Aboriginal Australians began to sink their roots of attachment into the Australian earth. It seems something of a myth that non-indigenous Australians did not love the landscape they found and made because it was not like the British countryside they knew. Native gardens existed alongside exotic plants in Tasmania in the 1840s,[14] and there is evidence of attachment to the Australian landscape by non-Aborigines even before that. Alan Atkinson, the historian of Camden, near Sydney, discovered what he thought was 'the first sign of a white man feeling awe or affection for the created landscape':

> And he who Beauty's might despising,
> Still loves to linger near her bower,
> Will find ere long, 'tis worth the prizing;
> And own with throbbing heart her power.[15]

Atkinson found in this 1827 poem a 'strong sense of place unlikely from the pens and mouths of mere invaders'.[16]

Later Australians, of course, found the land already cleared, so their roots were sunk not by creating the landscape but by living or working in it. The Western Australian writer Elizabeth Jolley thought that her love of what her father called 'scenery' derived in part from the bicycle rides he insisted upon when she was a child.[17] Lucy Turner, who grew up on a property near Mittagong, New South Wales, in the 1970s–80s, believed that belonging was a matter not of boundary fences nor clearing, but the physicality of actually being there:

> Making a house and a home very much my place or my family's place, definitely. I really like places that feel like they've got people in them almost more than places that feel very wild.

> So a ranger's house in the middle of the national park you probably wouldn't want to be interested in living in?
>
> Oh no, I could, if I could make some kind of area round it my place. I think it's important for people to have places that they feel like they've trod, often and all the time. I suppose it's like, you know, dogs urinating or something, you feel like this place is, because you've put so much of yourself into it or walked over it so many times it's going to protect you rather than fight against you. Or it's going to do something for you, like grow you some food. It's that sort of physical knowledge of the place, isn't it. You've gotta actually got to have had your body there.[18]

SPECIAL PLACES

Margaret Johnson had her own special places which she created by having her body there. In the homestead *the old kitchen had a life of its own*, cats curled up in warm corners, nappies hung on the towel rail, the iron kettle simmered on the hob, *a lovely feminine brittle gum* stood outside the window. Each cup of tea and brownie added to the thousands of other teas and brownies consumed in the same warmth, at the same table, on the same seats. *The daily events and the physical characteristics of the country are all sort of intertwined, it's a really very special precious, strong thing*. Had the walls themselves absorbed something of this human activity? *Oh yes, I think so. There's a patina, a richness.* There were other special places about the homestead which Margaret Johnson observed and absorbed. One was the jasmine bush outside the bedroom window where the birds gathered.

Margaret Johnson had her family soon so her earliest and most intimate attachments were associated with her children at sites near the house and garden. In the early years of her marriage, the play areas about the homestead became her most special places, *the dappled light of the trees and the needles under the pepper tree, and that sort of very peppery-tree smell*. These were the sites of playful imagination. Jim Johnson arranged to have a huge flat-topped granite rock placed close to the house in the front garden. Around it Margaret Johnson planted trees to form a grove. *I used to weave all sorts of stories for the children and grandchildren sitting on the rock.* 'There's Mrs Willy Wagtail, she's got to get a bit of water for her babies up in the bottlebrush. I wonder where Mr Willy Wagtail is?' Sticks, stones, feathers lying about, became the items associated, at the precise moment, with the precise location. *So that's a*

very favourite spot. A certain gully was associated with foxes: it became Fox Gully. 'Mr Rat' lived in the vegetable garden: there he was between two bales of hay, cleaning his whiskers, watching the children. Goblin Grotto, *the location of an enormous number of family picnics*, was a natural amphitheatre surrounded by box and kurrajong and *lovely blue granite rocks*. Here lived rabbits, foxes, snakes, lizards and goblins: *it was the sort of place they might be living in*. The Goblin Grotto creatures, each in their different houses and cooking areas, were supposed to have extended families who visited each other, played tricks and had adventures. *You get quite fascinated by those large eyes just looking at you taking in every word as though it's the absolute truth.* Near the front gate was *a wonderful little culvert with willows and poplar trees, and underneath the willows there's almost a house, just absolutely gorgeous*. In this place of silence, leaves fell upon the bank and the water was like a carpet. The culvert became the location of stories about real animals who came to swim or drink. Each occasion Margaret Johnson and the children picnicked there, the culvert held a different story about another animal and another purpose, but always the theme was the events which had occurred in this willowy house, in this shadowy room.

There were wilder and more intimate places, unsocialised and deserted, where Margaret Johnson went alone for the day with the dogs. *There are lovely places to go when you're sort of sick of family and house and home you can just take off and go to those wonderful places … Your attachments are really secret things. I don't talk much to others, but it helps to keep you on the level … you need an inner peace.* One special place was the site she selected as her burial place, *a lovely spot, up the creek, under a gorgeous gum tree that comes over a big granite rock and the water runs over it very softly*.

This was the Windermere which Margaret Johnson understood and absorbed over thirty-seven years and from which, in 1993, she was to be separated. Reflecting on these deep attachments, she considered that beyond the special wild places which bore their own intimate character, was the further dimension of socialisation: the events of family life had laid other layers of meaning over the homestead and the land—school, sickness, parties, visitors, celebrations, funerals, marriages, picnics. To the private sites and the public collective spaces had been added, in the magical last decade on the property, an unlooked-for relationship with her grandchildren, who became as intimately

involved in the same special places of Windermere as had her children. *The actual rich overlay is when your grandchildren come back, and they've been here, and you've been introducing them to all the things that you've loved. Just showing them the special things at Windermere made them stronger to me.* Grandchildren at Windermere provided *another layer to life.*

How have humans formed attachments to their special places? After marking out boundaries, clearing, working and the physical presence of being, the last part of bonding with the land is, for some, the creation of special, intimate or sacred sites. Individual differences are as great as cultural. The philosopher Karl Jung thought himself 'spread out over the landscape and inside things'; there was nothing, he thought, in his residence, that had not 'grown into its own form over the decades, nothing with which he was not linked'. So in tune was Jung with his special places that one night he witnessed hundreds of peasant boys marching past his home; these he surmised from reading old manuscripts, were the souls of the seventeenth-century soldiers of Wotan's Army. The soldiers marched over the land periodically, visible, Jung believed, only to those sufficiently in tune with the vibrations of the special places.[19]

There are many Australian analogies of deep spiritual bonds with the land. The Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins returned with her mother Rita to Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland, from which Rita had been removed sixty years earlier.

> The way my mother moved round, kissed the earth and said her prayers will have a lasting effect on my soul and memory because she was paying homage to her ancestors who had passed on long ago but whose presence we could still intensely feel … The land is our birthing place, our cradle; it offers us connection with the creatures, the trees, the mountains, the rivers and all living things. There are no stories of migration in our dreamtime stories. Our creation stories link us intrinsically to the earth.[20]

The poet David Campbell believed himself to be almost a physical part of the landscape of the southern tablelands of New South

Wales where he lived and worked, his own psyche both creator of, and element in, those significant sites. Campbell was a participant, as a critic put it, in a 'surreal dimension of energy, light and dance':

> The hawk, the hill, the loping hare
> The blue tree and the blue air
> O all the coloured world I see
> And walk upon, are made by me.[21]

The novelist Kate Llewellyn described her discovery—or was it creation?—of a sacred site in the Blue Mountains, near Sydney:

> There is no other access to this place and few people go there. Aboriginal drawings in the rocks lie wearing in the sun and wind, a tribal memory of the fish and whales and dolphins the people once caught here. The whole place has a magical and mystical feel about it and I never go there without being affected. It is secret, it is sacred, it's menacing and takes you in a gulp.[22]

Clare Milner, a farmer from Braidwood, New South Wales, believed that the people of the past shared sites with the living. She heard voices, she encountered and spoke with people evidently from the nineteenth century. Once she saw a slab hut suddenly become visible in an apparently empty paddock. When she investigated, she discovered buried in the grass the ruins of the cottage she had seen:

I was out in that paddock with a friend, and we were actually picking up some sheep that had mysteriously died in that paddock. And I looked up to where Annie was standing, and I suddenly saw a house, a slab cottage with smoke. And there were rabbit traps and harnesses hanging up along the verandah, and I said, 'Oh Annie look, there's a house there', and she of course thought I was mad. And then I ran up to where she was standing, and in amongst the grass we found the foundations of a cottage, and the foundations of a chimney. And that was very extraordinary proof to me that I did feel things that were there.[23]

Since at least the 1930s non-Aborigines have wondered about and compared their feelings of belonging with what they knew of Aboriginal attachments to the landscape. The rather pessimistic school

of nationalistic poetry known as the Jindyworobaks looked beyond scenic beauty to form for themselves a spiritual connection with the land. Frequently they failed, because, they believed, the brutal dispossession of the land by earlier generations had severed a possible connection. Rex Ingamells wrote in 'Unknown Land':

> We who are called Australians have no country.[24]

Following the more optimistic middle decades, the poetic theme that non-Aboriginal Australians could not form a legitimate attachment to the land returned in the 1970s. Non-Aborigines had appropriated the land materially, not spiritually: how then could they master the spirit of the place?[25] Judith Wright wrote:

> The love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me. It is a haunted country.[26]

When Margaret Johnson speculated with her children about who might previously have lived in Goblin Gully, Aborigines played no part. Reflection came later. Windermere Station was established in the country of the Wiradjuri Aboriginal people, but no one in her time remembers the Wiradjuri working or living on the property. Few artefacts have been found in the paddocks. In the 1990s Margaret Johnson tried to imagine how much the Wiradjuri loved the land:

After [my experiences] I really appreciated what the Aborigines must feel for their country, I mean it must be much stronger in them, because they haven't had the overlay of other things that I've got, another sort of education. They've got this very strong feeling for land.

So have you, though:

Yes, yes, but I can see how they must feel—what are they without that land, whereas I can sort of gather myself together and say, Right, I'll do some course, or other sorts of things at my fingertips.

Most farming children of Margaret Johnson's generation grew up heedless of Aboriginal attachments to the land into which they were