

INTRODUCTION

How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged?

My book *Returning to Nothing* explored the significance of places which we loved, and lost, and kept on loving. Savage were the emotions which we directed at the human destroyers of house, street or suburb, profound was the grief which we felt for sites gone forever.

Sometimes accompanying us on our journeys to nothing was the uninvited voice ever threatening to remind us that the land we loved was previously lost to others. We kept it at a distance. To invite conversation would have been to immobilise the mourning victims of lost place, then to paralyse the book itself. I wrote then:

Some New Zealand farmers have argued before the Waitangi Tribunal that they, not the Maori claimants, are the true inheritors of the high country, for they have loved it and cherished it for 200 years. Australian farmers are beginning to advance their own sets of valued memories, attachments and histories over the same areas claimed by Aboriginal people. Having worked for many years with Aborigines deprived of their country, and more recently with non-Aborigines deprived of theirs, I am filled with anxiety at the complexity of such disputed attachments. They await a second study which will follow this book.¹

Several reviewers of *Returning to Nothing* noted and welcomed my undertaking. They too seemed to feel that something unresolved, even illegitimate, clung about our attachments for as long as we ignored the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 | INTRODUCTION

skeleton at the feast. *Belonging* is the result. The problem which it confronts is this: those places which we loved, lost and grieved for were wrested from the Indigenous people who loved them, lost them and grieve for them still. Are such sites of all our deep affections to be contested, articulated, shared, forgone or possessed absolutely?

The usual starting point invites confusion and doubt. Let me demonstrate. We non-Indigenous cannot leave because we have nowhere to go and do not wish to go. Yes, but the Aboriginals have nowhere to go either. Yes, Aboriginals can return to the land which we have degraded. Yes, but firestick farming turned forests into grassland, surely that was environmental degradation? Yes, but Aboriginal land management was in harmony with nature. Yes, but Aboriginals have changed their nature and lost some of their skills; they too may degrade the land. Yes, but it's not the land we should be discussing but the nation. Yes, but the nation is composed of people of many ethnicities. Yes, but Aboriginals aren't like any other ethnic group, they were here first. Yes, but first doesn't matter: the equal ethnicities of multiculturalism presuppose equality for all. Yes, but not all Australians are equally responsible for the dispossession. Yes, but the dispossession affected all Aboriginals. Yes, but the dispossession was aided by Aboriginal explorers, guides, stockmen and police. Yes, but today's police are filling the cells disproportionately with Aboriginal prisoners. Yes, but these prisoners are breaking not only our laws but Aboriginal law. Yes, but any Aboriginal arrested for assaulting police is a political prisoner. Yes, but our political masters refuse to use the word 'apology' to the stolen generations. Yes, but generations of self-identifying Aboriginals are also descended from the white settlers who killed their own ancestors. Yes, but not all of our ancestors killed Aboriginals: some protected them. Yes, but how relevant is the protection offered by such visitors who now refuse to leave the house of Australia? Yes, but every room in that house is not just occupied, it is shared. Yes, but the decision about who shares which room is made by the authority of the non-Indigenous alone. Yes, but the moral authority is held by the Aboriginals. Yes, but we conceded the frailty of our moral claim on the country last century, then forgot it. Yes, but selective forgetfulness can be a virtue in a modern homogenous state. Yes, but how can we forget when we do not yet know the whole truth? Yes, but surely there is no real truth, only partisans telling parallel narratives. Yes, but we do not allow

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[More information](#)

the parallel narrative to be told. Yes, but theirs is a fundamentally different narrative of everlasting mythological and spiritual bonding with the land. Yes, but many non-Aboriginals also feel a spiritual bonding to the land. Yes, but the land isn't everything, we can bond with Australia independently of the land. Yes, but whatever the mechanism of bonding, equal citizenship implies equal responsibility for the past. Yes, but the past cannot be unmade. Yes, but while the past cannot be unmade it can be requited. Yes, but it is a bad principle of nationhood which acquits the dead by raising a levy against the living. Yes, but democratic living, which we accept, presupposes equal rights. Yes, but Indigenous rights, which we also accept, presuppose collective rights. Yes, but collective rights, which we also accept, may oppose individual rights. Yes, but Aboriginals are almost always prepared to sacrifice their individual rights for the good of the spiritual community. Yes, but many of us hold to some form or other of spirituality. Yes, but the modern rationalist state cannot privilege spiritual values over other values. Yes, but the old certitudes of rationalism are already moribund and should go back to Europe where they belong. Yes, but we cannot go back to Europe or anywhere else, we belong here and have nowhere else to go. Yes, but the Aboriginals have nowhere to go either. Full circle. What began as well-meaning confusion and doubt has led us to a painful intellectual and emotional impasse. It's clear that to advance our thinking we'll need to break from this constricting and self-defeating moral universe.

One way to begin is to reassess the self-denigration that portrays us as morally or spiritually deficient. In some cases we writers criticise ourselves more trenchantly than our Indigenous critics. The epigraph to the 1998 book *Seeking the Centre*, a study of the significance of the desert in Australian culture, asserts: 'At the heart of the book is the contrast between the European-driven notion of an empty, monotonous wilderness, and the profound spiritual relationship that Aboriginal Australians have with the desert.'²

The author writes: 'The poet Judith Wright has succinctly expressed the conceptual divide between European notions of a landscape derived from the perspective of an empowered observer, whose magisterial gaze calls an appropriately aesthetic prospect into being, and the Aboriginal understanding of a spirit-filled landscape through which individuals access their identity.'³ The judgements are

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 INTRODUCTION

belied by the book itself, which presents many cultural affirmations of deserts by non-Indigenous Australians in terms anything but monotonous and empty. I ask myself, why do Aboriginals have relationships while we only have *notions*? Why do our notions *derive* while Aboriginals simply *understand*? I doubt if the magisterial gaze of European Australians any longer calls an 'appropriately aesthetic prospect into being'. Previous generations of anthropologists like Stanner, Elkin, and Ron and Catherine Berndt, who well understood Aboriginal civilisation, did not find it necessary to elevate its majesty through denigrating their own culture. David Tacey writes of the 'spiritually barren ... middle classes of white suburbia'.⁴ I do not know anyone to whom I would apply that epithet. The whole of *Returning to Nothing* challenged Robert Dessaix's unlikely assertion that we Australians have no hearth to tell our stories around.⁵ The art critic and painter Robert Levitus described his experiences trying to paint the landscape near Nimbin, NSW, as 'simply overwhelming'. He realised, he wrote, that he would never fit, and that probably no-one from a non-Aboriginal background ever does. White Australians did not have the benefit of many centuries of living in one place; but a relationship nevertheless existed, he continued, based on the diverse experiences of travel and exile. It was a transitory relationship to place and the landscape which did 'not allow for a deepening understanding of it or a symbiotic relationship with it, but which is coupled with a yearning to belong'.⁶

Why should it take hundreds of years to develop a relationship with landscape sufficiently to paint it well? Imagine such an assertion in the context that Australia actually was unoccupied in 1778 so that there was nobody to whom we could now compare ourselves. Surely then we would acknowledge spiritual diversity in the desert, a permanent home at the hearth, emotional strength in the suburbs, conviction and passion at the easel. The problem begins to emerge as one of self-perception, of whether, as non-Indigenous, one *should* paint landscape well.

It has not always been so. Bernard Smith observed that, a hundred years ago, 'To paint Australia you had to be Australian ... Unless you were born with "Australian" eyes you could not hope to "see" the Australian landscape.'⁷ In the last quarter-century many of us have substituted 'Aboriginal' for (Anglo-Celtic) Australian. Confrontation with the role of the British in the dispossession brought not only a long overdue restraint and reflection to our national history, but

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Peter Read

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to many of us, including myself, self-doubt and potential paralysis. Some of us took on the burden of guilt so earnestly that we half believed ourselves unworthy even to be here.

A second starting-point will be to allow that emotions and intuitions are part of deep belonging. Veronica Brady asks why the rationalists, distrusting the notion of sacredness and suspecting the metaphysical, fail to move 'across the boundary'. Some Australians seem trapped within what is left of the wholly rationalist mind-set, which is unable to cope with difference and, in relation to Aboriginal spiritualism, assimilationist. Our culture seems unable to deal with the Aboriginal 'other'.⁸ Brady's own sense of belonging derives from many sources: from literature, awe, fear and fascination, respect for spirituality: listening rather than speaking, sharing rather than competing, the self flowing into and part of the whole, a sadness at the violation of what we first encountered.⁹

No, the reader might exclaim, stop talking on my behalf. I do not suffer any of your paralysing debilities. I love Australia, I embrace a spiritual dimension to my life! Just so. Everyone I have quoted so far, so far as I know, is like me: university-educated, urban, middle-class and Anglo-Celtic. Perhaps it is only this group which feels itself to be trapped. May it be that other Australians, older or younger, of other ethnicities, education, interests, culture, history and experience may not perceive the problem as they do? They may have different responses. They may not apprehend what I am presenting to be a problem at all.

I propose, then, to abandon the safe boundaries of reasoned self-doubt. To try to escape the ideological impasse I plan to encounter with book, map, camera, tape-recorder or CD player, Australians of every variety: young Australians, Asian Australians, foreign-born Australians, rich Australians, seventh-generation Australians, rural Australians, just-arrived Australians, poets, artists, country and western musicians, atheists, metaphysicians, spiritualists, those who have worked closely with Aboriginals, those whose land is under Indigenous claim, those who have yet to meet an Indigenous person face to face. What conceptions of belonging will they bring to this divided land, how will they place themselves in relation to the Indigenous past and present? I do not know what people I will meet or what arguments they will advance. In truth, I have no idea how this book will end. I confess to being a little apprehensive.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 1

DEEP IN THE
SANDSTONE GORGES

The deep sandstone country just north of Sydney has inspired much creative art. Margaret Preston painted it; Douglas Stewart, Robert Adamson and David Campbell wrote poetry about it; Axel Poignant photographed it. The Ku-ring-gai Aboriginals carved rocks, danced corroborees and sang songs of creation and renewal. Cowan Creek and the lower Hawkesbury River have been compared to the Norwegian fjords because, like them, the bays and inlets are formed from drowned river valleys. The plunging gullies look like flowing watercourses, but they are not, the water is salt. The weathered sandstone cliffs tower hundreds of feet above the green-black water.

I made my first visit to Cowan Creek more than forty years ago at the age of nine or ten and have been coming back ever since. The local fisherfolk know every eddy, deep pool and outcrop by local names, but I know only the sites on the printed maps: Apple Tree Bay, Lords Bay, Smiths Creek, Coal and Candle Creek, Jerusalem Bay, Cottage Point, Church Point, Croppy Point, Foleys Bay. The origin of most of the names is obvious, but some remain mysterious: Croppy Point, Gunyah Point, Calabash Bay. Croppy is an old Aboriginal word for convict. A gunyah is an Aboriginal bark shelter. A calabash is the African equivalent of coolamon, the Aboriginal bark or wood cradle.

The tradition of an annual visit to this place of my childhood continues. Once a year I set out with a group of nine friends for two or three days. We embark at Bobbin Head in an ancient wooden cruiser hired from the grumpy staff whose company has held the franchise for generations. Usually we leave on a Friday afternoon at about 4.30, my

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Peter Read

Excerpt

[More information](#)

friend Margot at the helm. We negotiate a passage through the moored cruisers, and head out past the people fishing on the rocks to Apple Tree Bay. Twenty minutes later Lords Bay is to starboard, Cotton Tree Bay to port. In mid-autumn the declining sun holds half the eastern sandstone cliffs in gold, the trunks of the angophoras are yellow-brown, and in the lower deep shade the darkening water slaps at the boulders and buoys. The crew congregate in twos and threes at different points on the boat to absorb the cooling afternoon. Spirits lift. These first thirty minutes after setting out is the most intense part of the most physically intense part of my year. Old-timers say that once the waters of Cowan Creek used to be cleaner and quieter, the fish enormous. What's it matter? Belonging to loved country is now, not then. It was quieter and cleaner still before the British invasion of Australia.

Cowan Creek is a place of my deep memory and experience. Castle Lagoon, where Jay and I spent the first night of our honeymoon; Eleanor Beach, known to us as Bridie's Birthday Beach (it was her tenth); Bobbin Head, where I just caught hold of my other daughter Jess as she slipped noiselessly overboard; Pinta Bay, where I celebrated a rowdy fiftieth birthday; the Coal and Candle Creek marina, where a sheet blew irretrievably from a makeshift clothesline; Calabash Bay, where the carelessly anchored cruiser rose on the tide and drifted away with Jess and her friend Chantal still aboard; Dangar Island, known to my family as Danger Island after a hair-raising adventure with a strong current; Jerusalem Bay, where such a boisterous gale got up one night that it blew the pillow from under the head of Margot's daughter Anna, sleeping on the deck. Sounds: I can still hear my mother's squeak of delight when she woke one morning in Castle Lagoon to see the bush swinging past our windy anchorage; Julia reading the poetry of her native New Zealand; the roar of the engine moments before a breathtaking dawn; the excited shouts as Con reeled in a huge hairtail at Smiths Creek; sounding a futile SOS on the horn as we drifted motorless down the Hawkesbury into the gathering dusk; Ken's bagpipe rendition of 'Dark Island' to toots at first appreciative from far-away cruisers; Jane's songs from the north of England; the general execrations at an unnamed but often discussed place in Pittwater where a flounder (the only one we've ever caught before or since) slipped between the fingers of its scaler, then between the struts of the boarding platform and vanished; late-night conversations with Trish on

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Peter Read

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 | BELONGING

the roof of the cabin staring into a black and starry sky; the crash at Mackerel Beach when the drying rack hit the floor, breaking half the ship's crockery after the passage of a disobliging power-boat. Activities: night rowing in the magical phosphorescent waters; marooned on sandbanks; storms that woke the kids and set them crying for hours; half a metre of mast knocked off the sailing dinghy we were towing under the wrong arch of the Hawkesbury road bridge; a catfish bite for which the only known palliative appeared to be long swigs of rum; Julia's son Tom refusing to let his lunch interfere with the passage of a school of bream; Pat untangling a thousand childish fishing lines; hats pitched overboard by gusts; sundry emergency repairs to the ailing diesel systems; gliding to an evening anchorage at America Bay; Charlie Perkins, who had come out for the day, finding an Aboriginal stone fishing trap at Yeoman's Bay. My memory map of the area would take a day to draw.

Over many years I've explored the historic sites along and above the water. Windybanks boatshed, the remains of a paddle steamer at Waratah Bay, the walking track up to Cowan railway station. The waterway was much more heavily used last century; the remains of wharves, picnic kiosks and boatsheds are quite common. For those who know what to look for, evidence of the Aboriginal past also is everywhere.

The most common sites are shell middens, some 50 metres long; smaller ones occur every half a kilometre. I've found traces of substantial Aboriginal camps in overhangs and caves at the heads of little creeks, 50 metres above high tide. Often you'll find traces of smoky fires underneath the rock shelters, though the one behind the waterfall at Refuge Bay has been almost destroyed by the scrambling feet of three or four generations of visitors. The nineteenth-century ethnographers made much of the numerous sandstone carvings, but the absence of regular burning for more than a century has obscured most of them. In 1995 Anna, Jay and I, following a vanished track on an old map, went on a toilsome but futile search for one supposedly at the head of Castle Lagoon. I still don't know whether the site has been overgrown or if its whereabouts is now lost and forgotten. Precise information past the guidebook generalities is hard to obtain.

Knowledge about the post-invasion Aboriginal past seems to have disappeared recently but suddenly. As a lad in the 1950s I once set

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Peter Read

Excerpt

[More information](#)

out from Bobbin Head with a friend of my father who pointed out to me what he called an Aboriginal corroboree ground, possibly a bora ring. I still have the black and white photo that I took with my Brownie Box, on which I wrote, in spidery red biro, 'Abos corobory place'. What fascinates me now are the questions—where exactly was that site? How did my father's friend know what and where it was? How did that information last until the mid-1950s, and then disappear so suddenly? No ranger or anyone else I have ever asked is able to help.

One sunny Saturday morning, the night after Con caught the hairtail, I left the others and walked up the steep slope from Cotton Tree Bay. Soon the angophoras gave way to grasstrees and dry sclerophyll scrub. I scrambled about a kilometre up the steep slope and there, half an hour after leaving the boat, in a silent and deserted clearing which looked as though it hadn't been visited for a century, I made a discovery that haunts me yet. Under a ledge of rock less than a metre high was a little pile of clam shells. By their remote position, the low shelf, and the finely discernible layer of dust in this serene and silent site, they were clearly Aboriginal, maybe 150 years old. The rocky ledge and its silent contents gave me a shiver of excitement that I still carry. In type it was not different from hundreds along the water line, but much smaller, the work of a single individual, more remote and isolated. I know of no others so intimate or so far above the water.

My discovery revived in me all the problems of wanting to belong in this breathtaking country of deepest personal and family memory. The hushed shell-pile reminds me that Cowan Creek is deep Aboriginal country also. I ask myself: Do I have the right to belong in this soul-country? Do Aboriginals belong in some deeper way than the rest of us, even though none as yet lays a Native Title claim to it? Would such a pre-emptive claim of belonging—if that is what a Native Title claim is—reduce or disqualify my own sense? If so, must it always? Considering those questions, and how non-Aboriginal Australians are grappling with them, is the subject of this book.

The mighty gorges and the dancing past whispered to the poet Douglas Stewart as insistently as they do to me. Close to midnight in the 1950s, fishing near a dark slope on one of those hushed and luminous nights, Stewart began to reflect upon a rock carving near his boat, and upon the artist who, like all artists, he supposed, spoke to future as well as present:

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Peter Read

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 | BELONGING

The moon lights a thousand candles upon the water,
 But none for the carver of stone; and nobody comes
 Of his own long-scattered tribe to remember him.
 But he walks again for me at the water's rim ...
 And whoever laughs is a little afraid in the end,
 For here is a swimmer in stone, and a 'roo that leaps
 Nowhere for ever, and both can be touched with the hand, ...
 Centuries dead perhaps. But night and the water
 And a 'roo and a fish on a rock have brought us together,
 Fishermen both, and carvers both, old man ...
 Maybe it's all for nothing, for the sky to look at,
 Or maybe for us the distant candles dance. ...
 The boat tugs at the kellick as it feels the ebb.
 Good-bye, old wraith, and good luck. You did what you could
 To leave your mark on stone like a mark on time,
 That the sky in the mind and the midnight sea in the blood
 Should be less of a desolation for the men to come;
 And who can do more than you? Gone, you are gone;
 But, dark a moment in the moonlight, your hand hovers
 And moves like the shadow of a bird across the stone.¹

A majestic invocation; yet the implications are worrying. Stewart, untouched by the post-colonial uncertainties that have afflicted many of us non-Indigenous Australians in the last quarter-century, created his art for the sake of art. His home was not *unheimlich*, that post-colonial condition which seems to render our own place unfamiliar and strange, alien and inaccessible.² He wrote in the comfortable assumption of the 1950s by which Aboriginal people—here the Ku-ring-gai—had simply gone away. The 'midnight sea in the blood', the dark, restless human spirit, was not fixed to this moonlit carving, not this quiet waterway, but to the world, not Aboriginal, nor yet Australian: but universal. An overarching sensibility united poet and artist more strongly than the rather obvious—to us—discontinuity which divided them. My reaction is—*the Ku-ring-gai people just didn't happen to go away by themselves*. If the country was empty of Indigenous people a century after Governor Phillip's exploring party rowed up the Hawkesbury, surely they had been driven from their country by disease, hunger and despair. Maybe