HUGH BRODY - INSIDE LAKE BALLARD

First steps

The first steps I took inside Australian's western desert were on the forecourt of the Menzies' garage, cafe and petrol station. Antony had driven us from Perth, leaving at 5am and stopping only for food and camping supplies in Kalgoorlie. We had been hurrying to meet with Paddy Walker, the Aboriginal elder who had to give his permission for the INSIDE AUSTRALIA project to go ahead.

There was another car on the forecourt, a ute with its doors open. An old, very dark man with white hair and beard sat in the front; another, younger man was leaning against the truck. On the garage wall, I noticed a poster with pictures of different poisonous snakes and a few lines about what to do if you were bitten. A third Aboriginal man was leaning on the wall beside the poster, 'Hey', he called out to the others, 'This is the guys we're meeting'. He was Ralph, he said, 'and this is Ron and', pointing to the elderly man in the truck, 'this is Paddy Walker. He's the law man.' We shook hands all round, apologizing for having kept them waiting. Ron said it hadn't been for too long, but we had better get going, out to the lake. He said they'd follow us out there. 'We can just follow your tracks', said Ralph. 'We can follow tracks, that's why they call us Black Fellas.' And he burst out laughing.

The wind was gusting hard from the north-west, the direction in which we were heading. Dark clouds were piling up ahead. We drove out on a long dirt road. After about fifty kilometres, Antony slowed and somehow managed to find the mark that showed where we were to turn off to Lake Ballard itself. We went along a faint track, through the scrub, and came to a sand dune that rises to form the lake's south-west shore.

It was an astonishing landscape: the surface of the lake dead level, one wide arm stretched ahead, another disappearing around a headland to the south-east. Even under the dark, gloomy sky, the lake seemed to glow. No more than a hundred metres from the shore, a strange island rose in a perfect cone from the surface. Beyond it were other islands, low and faint as they appeared one beyond another.

A few minutes after we arrived, Paddy, Ron and Ralph drove up. They told us to go closer to the lake shore; the sand dune was firm enough to drive on. It was beginning to rain and the wind was still strong. 'Better get inside', said Ron and he got into the driver's seat, alongside Paddy. Antony and I climbed into the back seat, Ralph's considerable size causing us to squash hard against him. It was a tight fit.

Ron turned round. 'Well,' he began, 'we've been talking about this sculpture idea on the way here, and Paddy here says it's all right. He is giving you permission to go ahead.' Then he went on, 'But to do this, you have to know the story. He'll tell you the story in his words, in his language, and I'll translate for you.' He turned to Paddy. 'Right, go ahead, tell them the story, then.'

Paddy Walker told us the story in a soft voice, speaking mostly in his own Ngulutjara language, giving short pieces of the tale in cryptic form. We were hearing an outline, key bits, the essence. Ron made it clear that this was a story from the Dreamtime. As Paddy spoke, the wind blew hard enough to rock the car, and then the rain poured down, clattering on the roof and across the windscreen. We seemed to have removed ourselves from any actual place. In a strange cocoon, we listened.

'This is woman's dreaming. You are a lucky man to have found a woman's dreaming. You know the seven sisters stars? The seven sisters stars in the sky? This is on their path. They came across the lake here, playing around. They stopped here.

'That island right in front of us, the largest of the islands, that is the oldest of the sisters. The other islands, heading out there, up the lake, are the other sisters, the younger ones. Down the lake there are two hills, look like young girls' breasts. Those hills were made by the splitting of an egg-shaped stone by a boomerang. Further on is a place where one of the sisters fell down and laid on the ground. You can see the marks, where her breasts went into the ground, and where her face touched the ground.

'This is where the sisters came down from the sky and were playing around out there. Then a man began chasing them, trying to catch the youngest one. So they had to run away. They had to hide. They hid in rock holes. There are rock holes down the shore of the lake, back where we came from just now, and they hid in those seven holes. This is on the camping route to Jeedamya and Morapoi. Then they came up through the lake, and became the islands out there. One island leads to another, one after the other, way up the lake there. That's where they were heading, to this place. You have to know what you are looking at, what these places are.'

Paddy was giving us just a glimpse of the Seven Sisters, enough to know that as you walked out among these islands you would be going into their terrain. And enough to have a sense of connections - between the story and the land around us, the earth and the sky, the present and most distant past.

At one point, as the rain came down in a sudden torrent, Ron said 'This is the sisters making the rain. I guess they are not happy that we are telling you their story.' But Paddy and Ron kept going. And once Paddy had told us as much as he wanted us to hear, they talked about other things. Ron was concerned to make sure that we understood Paddy's status.

'Put it this way,' he said, 'if this was the white fella's army, this man' - pointing to Paddy - 'would be commander in chief. And this man' - pointing to Ralph - 'would be sergeant.' They all laughed.

We also talked about names. Paddy's Aboriginal name was Bajata. 'The name his mother gave him, his nickname', said Ron. Ralph's surname was Ashwin, after his white grandfather, and through whom Ralph told us he had ties to many families in Europe, including one family of Ashwins in Italy. Ron explained that he had been given the name Ron Smith by the Schenks, the evangelists who ran the Mount Margaret Mission where he had been sent as a small boy. His father was a white man called Harrington, who had been on his deathbed when Ron met him. They all had many links, to the land around us, through their dreaming to many other parts of the land, and, through all part of their heritage, to places far, far away.

The rain let up, and we got out of the car. Antony asked if there would be more rain later. 'No', said Ron. 'We've told you the story now; the sisters are feeling OK.' As we stood outside Ron's ute, he repeated that Antony had permission to work on the lake. But there had to be an agreement:

everything had to be the same when it was all over as it is now. Nothing can be changed or damaged.

Later I was to hear other parts of the 'Seven Sisters Dreaming' story. I was taken to see the rock holes where the sisters hid. I was shown a little of how the line of the story reached to the north, touching the earth as rock holes and dream sites, until it reached another dreaming line going across the Seven Sisters. In one version of the story, the sisters are chased by a wild man, penis out and erect, with many ritual scars and determined to seize the youngest of the girls. In another version, I was told of a handsome young man who loved one of the sisters and wished to dance with her. And I was told about a tree at the east end of Lake Ballard that is one of the sisters, standing there, alone and waiting to join the others. The stories were many, various, complicated and, at times, confusing. But they always led from the lake, or the rock holes, in dream trail to other places. They sit as one thread in a great web of stories and knowledge.

In this way, the Dreamtime stories are like the many different groups to which each Aboriginal person belongs. You have the country you were born and raised in, the place 'you walk about' and know as your own, your 'Ngurra'. This gives you links to those who grew up there, walked about there with you. And you have your totem or sign, which comes from the father and is linked to the spiritual events of conception. This establishes bonds with others who have the same totem. And you have your 'skin', which has to be different from that of either your father or mother, but will be the same as others all over the Desert region. This means that you have family - parents, cousins, siblings and children - in many Aboriginal communities. Wherever you find people with the same 'skin', you belong - even if it is to a people and place you have never seen. So everyone belongs to very specific places, where they have lived, hunted and gathered, attended ceremonies; and everyone belongs, also, to many, many other places and peoples. Languages, Dreamtime stories, dreaming sites, names and 'skins' make up this web of connection - rooting a person in Ngurra, while allying everyone to a large, intricate Aboriginal world that spreads all through the centre of Australia.

But the Aboriginal people here hold onto the threads that lead from one part of their world to another, from this lake up into the skies with the seven stars of the Pleiades, along the surfaces of the rocks to the places they walked as children, and through the bush and the people who use and have lived there - threads that are strong and almost invisible, like the silk of spiders, attaching them to a web of people and places far away from Lake Ballard.

First Europeans

On both sides of the lake stand ridges of rubble and thin shafts into the earth: the work of gold miners. These are small pointers to the industry that brought white Australians into the region, and sustained them there.

In 1869, John Forrest, the man who would later be the first premier of Western Australia, led an expedition into the western desert. Forrest's guide and companion was Tommy Windich, an Aboriginal from another land, but able to lead Forrest along Aboriginal trails, discover water holes and help manage relations with Aboriginal groups they ran into. They spent 113 days crossing 2,000 miles. The western desert did not hold out great prospects for the new Australian frontier economy. The land seemed forbidding, disagreeable, arid and of little economic significance.

But in 1892, prospectors found gold nuggets and evidence of rich gold-bearing ore in Coolgardie and then near Kalgorla, an Aboriginal dreaming site, which the prospectors wrote as Kalgoorlie. News of the find leaked out. Within weeks a gold rush burst into

Western Australia. At first the rush centred on the Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie discoveries. But in 1894, groups of prospectors began to head north, probing a line that created staging points with names that tell us how far they had got from Coolgardie: a track led to 'Twentyfive Mile', then on to 'Ninetymile', and then some twenty miles beyond this. Two of the men who were pushing their way along this track were L. R. Menzie and J. E. McDonald. They depended on 'Jimmy', an Aboriginal who did their tracking and kept them safe in the bush; and on Cumbra, an Afghan camel driver, who kept their supplies loaded and moving. At Ninetymile, Menzie met J. J. Brown, a miner who had already sunk a shaft. Menzie was eager to purchase an existing mine for the Perth syndicate that backed him; he set out to inspect the site.

The terrain was not easy. Misreading their route, Menzie and his party ran out of water, had to take an eighteen-mile side trip to the east, and then headed back too far to the west, travelling to one side of the Brown shaft. But while they were lost, Menzie suddenly noticed nuggets and quartz that were heavy with gold. They realized that they had struck rich. Leaving Jimmy and Cumbra at the site, Menzie and McDonald set off to register a claim. On 1 October 1894, they secured two leases, which became the Lady Shelton and Florence mines. Other claims were registered. Within weeks, out in a remote corner of the Australian bush, a town was being built - or rather, thrown together. By the end of 1895, the town, given the name 'Menzies', had three hotels, a tent hospital, a post office, a town clerk, two policemen and two banks. Five years later, there were thirteen hotels, a railway line, two breweries, a school and, at its peak, a population of close to 10,000.

By then, 50,000 miners had come to the region. They created many towns not far from Menzies: Niagara, Kookynie, Malcolm and Leonora, to name a few. Each of these has its own story of sudden boom, astonishing vigour (the brewery in Kookynie, with a peak population in 1905 of 1,500, is reported to have made 400,000 gallons of beer in ten years) and real hardship (all the towns endured drought, fierce summer heat, floods and deadly outbreaks of cholera and typhoid). The people who came to live and work in these places were brave, resourceful and, in their own world, humane.

The Lady Shenton was the most productive gold mine in the area (yielding a total of some 132,000 ounces of gold); but there were others too: Queensland Menzies, Crusoe, Friday, Florence, Aspasia-Pandora and Lady Sherry. The names of these mines - like the whole story of the gold rush to places like Menzies - say something about the culture of the newcomers. Or at least their distance from the cultures that were alive in the country into which they had ventured and laid claim. There are few if any names with Aboriginal origins; and there were few if any links between the miners and the Aboriginal people they met. It is true that the first explorers and prospectors depended on Aboriginal trackers and guides - for the most part, men who came from other regions. But once camps had been set up, roads and railways opened, and Menzies was in place, Aboriginals were of no use to the community or the industry. They were not looked to as labourers. Even the freight system before the railways came depended on Afghans and their camels rather than on Aboriginal strength or knowledge. The photographs and documents from the time, like the histories that recall the great explosion of the gold frontier in Western Australia, pay scant attention to the Aboriginal people who occupied the Goldfields before they were seen as fields of gold.

At a tough frontier, where men came with a grim determination to live a rough, hard-drinking life in order to get rich beyond dreams, societies grew that were touched, and perhaps made bearable, by every kind of effort both to meet and to soften hardship, loneliness and ill-health. A collection of writings and memories from Kookynie includes the poignant couplet:

'Little deeds with pleasant meanings,

Hungry hearts can understand.'

That kindly deeds did not include any real effort to respect or make an accommodation with the Aboriginal people stands as no special judgment on the mining frontier: an activity of its times, it shared with the rest of Australia a sense of utter estrangement from Aboriginal heritage. What existed as society was what white people created - however sudden or improvised or alien. And what miners created was indeed sudden and alien - bursting onto the most arid and rugged of lands with a need for services, progress and water.

Mining is about only one kind of relationship to the land where it takes place: extraction of that which brings wealth. There is no need to nourish the earth to ensure that ore exists, or increases. Nor is there an inclination to widen the project to other kinds of wealth: when it comes to gold, the miner focuses his all on the way to find the wealth that would mean he could go and live in luxury elsewhere. And once the chance for this wealth has gone, so too is everyone and everything else that the mining frontier brings with it. The land, along with other ways of using, knowing and living in it, is found, mined and then left to fend for itself. There is drama to the gold frontier: the booms are sudden, extreme, exciting. Thousands of people rush to one place, then to another; communities spring up in the unlikeliest places; great shafts and holes are smashed into the earth, while millions of tons of rock are crushed and searched for the particles of wealth they are believed to conceal.

Standing at the lake or in Menzies, thinking about miners and mining, the rest of the world seems far away. But all frontiers come from somewhere else, and lead back there. The people who poured into the area, and created the Menzies boom, travelled from many parts of the world. Men who had suffered disappointment in the California goldfields; men who had come from Europe to find new kinds of freedom in Australia; men who had drifted across Australia, drawn by the latest mining book. And some women: a few wives at first, more later, and then families with children born into the new towns. Prostitutes, too, of course - at its peak, Kalgoorlie had a whole street of brothels. Society came from elsewhere: the languages spoken were those of other places, other countries, as were the books and magazines people read and the style of clothing they wore especially for the big occasions. The newcomers brought with them their horses, dogs, cats, and the germs of the diseases from which they suffered. As the money came, so the things money bought came as well. Almost everything was imported, from water to building materials to basic foodstuffs. The economics of the market - of relative values, the costs of imports and exports to the region shaped life at every level. Consortiums in New York, London, Wales and the cities of Australia determined what happened in places like Menzies. A future president of the United States made his career at Gwalia. And Gwalia itself is named for ancient Wales, an ideal homeland that the original investors held to as their heritage. Businesses and careers across the world played on the boom. The price of gold, alongside the costs of processing ore, determined levels of wages and wealth in the goldfields. In the end, the supply or accessibility of gold, all around Menzies, determined the future of the place and its frontier community. Menzies and its people like the Aboriginals they excluded - lived in a web of connections.

First farms

On the surface of the lake, beyond the oldest of the sisters, and on both sides of that wide bay of the lake, are two incomplete lines of broken fence posts. By the shores, the posts stand up to their full height, but as they stretch on to the lake, they disappear: either the mud, sand and salt have drifted high up their sides, or their tops have been worn and battered down. Most of what remains of a fence line are black stumps, fading into the lake: mementoes of another kind of story - of herders and farmers rather than hunters and gatherers or prospectors and miners.

This is a region where no one can own land outside the limits of a town. Miners got exploration leases; those who wished to set up sheep or cattle ranches got pastoral leases. The first sheep and cattle stations in what came to be known as the Eastern Goldfields were set up in the 1870s, in the coastal area about five hundred kilometres south of Menzies. The pastoral frontier did not move far inland before the discovery of gold. Some leases inland were issued in the early 1900s, and between 1910 and 1920 many stations were set up in the land around Menzies. In these years, a tradition of pastoralism took shape that many pastoralists now see as a golden age.

These leases on dry lands, with its mixture of desert and scrub, were large - many of 500,000 acres or more. Three such leases include parts of Lake Ballard: Riverina and Mt Marmion surrounds the west end, Kookynie includes about a third of the north and Jeedamya lies across the east end of the lake. Much of the south shore adjoins a national park and, more recently, an Aboriginal pastoral lease. The land was used for grazing cattle and sheep. Dependent on the vagaries of rain and drought, enough grasses grew to support scattered herds. And the dry, coarse vegetation appeared to many to be ideal for raising sheep for wool.

The family of John and Kath Finlayson held the lease to Jeedamya throughout the heyday of pastoralism, from the 1940s until 1999. The Jeedamya homestead was built in 1920. John's father, A. H. Finlayson, bought it and assumed the lease in 1949. He also bought an abandoned hotel in Malcolm, tore it down and rebuilt the Jeedamya house with the old bricks and timbers. John was born at Jeedamya; Kath married John, and they lived at the station, raising a family, for thirty years. They managed 580,000 acres and ran 12,000 sheep. Some twelve Aboriginals worked for them, which provided support for an Aboriginal community on Jeedamya numbering about fifty.

John and Kath recall their time at Jeedamya as a distinctive and dignified way of life. They relied on special skills, extraordinary resourcefulness. Kath described the annual round of work. April to May was committed to maintenance - especially the upgrading of mills and fixing and extending fences. Jeedamya had 32 water mills, and around double that number of water points. All of this had to be checked and fixed. And there were 390 miles of fences. Shearing was carried out in November and December: all adult sheep would have to be penned, sheared, checked and released - 10,000 in eight weeks meant an average of 180 animals per day. Then all the stock would be moved across the land again, with daily checks on animals, mills and fences in February and March.

We can go to Lake Ballard and see the land, the lake and the society of a sheep station through the eyes of John and Kath Finlayson. Theirs was a particular way of being on the land; they lived and worked there as part of a frontier economy, making changes yet seeking to keep the land productive. Like many others, they looked out on the lake as a place they loved.

As pastoralists and their workers rode out onto the land, mustering or checking fences and windmills, as they found themselves in a leasehold that could be seventy-five miles from one end to another, they must have felt an extreme sense of isolation. So far from the rest of the world, from other parts of Australia, even from their nearest neighbours. Some of the pride of pastoralists lies in the way this isolation was managed, accepted or overcome. But there were many threads that tied the pastoralists to other, outer worlds. Their fortunes depended on the prices of wool in remote markets; and those markets were at the mercy of events in Europe, Asia and even the Americas: wars, recession, new technologies; changes in the supply and demand for wool and meat across Australia and in international markets. As prices moved on stock exchanges in Tokyo, London and Sidney, pastoralists around Lake Ballard prospered or struggled accordingly. Prices were matched by weather in this set of links; but profit margins and healthy cashflow meant that drought or floods could be coped with. The interplay of economic and international variables led into all the homes

on the leasehold lands, and had the power to shape life in them. A history of links between the remotest corner of the most immense station and almost anywhere and everywhere else in the world.

First encounters

No one seems sure of the date; it was some time around 1900. The place was Yerilla, east of Menzies. Two prospectors discovered that Aboriginal guides had raided their supplies. Enraged, perhaps by their failure as prospectors as much as by the theft, the two men captured a group of Aboriginal girls, chained them to some trees, and raped them. When the girls' relatives realized what had happened, they attacked the prospectors, hurling spears under cover of darkness. The white men were not hurt, but they counterattacked. They made their way to a nearby water hole, where they killed some thirty people. Word reached the region's police, and the prospectors were arrested and tried for murder. The verdict: justifiable homicide.

This is one of several such stories in the record of early encounters between Aboriginals and miners in the Goldfields region, though the evidence of both the written and oral history record suggests that this kind of murderous confrontation was rare. But the Yerilla episode reveals the extent to which Aboriginals could not look to Australian law to protect them from the excesses of colonists' behaviour. Still less, therefore, could they look to colonial law to protect them from the way colonialism took the land itself into alien ownership and control. Indeed, government attitudes to, and treatment of, Aboriginals from the creation of Western Australia in 1829 until the 1950s can be seen in a series of grim pieces of legislation.

The 1874 Industrial Schools Act gave government the right to detain Aboriginals from infancy up to the age of 21, and the power to confine them to educational institutions. This opened the way for missions and government stations that would take and hold Aboriginal children to 'civilize' them. Then came the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1886 and the Aborigines Act of 1905. One scholar has summarized these as the measures that 'enshrined the contempt and pessimism which in the nineteenth century dominated European attitudes towards Aborigines'. By the 1920s there were about sixty institutions scattered across Western Australia designed to hold, educate and remake Aboriginal children. A common experience for Aboriginals has been the most profound displacement a human being can experience.

The legislation meant to sustain and advance this process continued after the 1920s. The 1936 Native Administration Act introduced yet more laws to increase government control of Aboriginal life. It also defined children of mixed race as 'Natives'. In that same year, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, one A. O. Neville, declared the Kalgoorlie-Boulder townsites 'a prohibited area': all Aboriginals not in 'legal employment' could be forced out.

A reality of mining is that it does not depend on local labour. So its frontier does not celebrate, or decry, indigenous peoples. They are simply absent, or an occasional diversion at the very periphery of new towns. Not so much a diversion, perhaps, as a form of nuisance: as the towns sought to change themselves from rough camps and sprawls of shacks into real, respectable communities, the Aboriginals who drifted in and out of them received ever more hostile treatment. According the missionary Schenk, in some of the new towns an officer had the job, each day at noon, of riding round the streets driving Aboriginals out of the town boundary, using a whip with sadistic enthusiasm to achieve best effect.

When it came to the pastoral frontier, the story has been very different. Large numbers of Aboriginals came to live, and some to work, on cattle and sheep stations. Both men and women came to be expert at herding stock, riding and breaking horses, fencing and maintenance - the core skills needed by the white pastoralists. The 1905 Aborigines Act had anticipated that this would be the most important source of employment, and had duly insisted that pastoralists provide their Aboriginal employees with food, clothing and blankets. No mention was made of wages; and many were paid little if anything.

The number of Aboriginals working on stations in the Eastern Goldfields fluctuated between two and three hundred. These may well be far below the real levels: given the pastoralists' way of hosting extended families, the difference between a worker and a worker's relative may have been somewhat blurred. Pastoralists may also have had an interest in keeping the official numbers low: the law did require that there be some payment to each worker, albeit in kind rather than in cash.

Pastoralism became a focus for much Aboriginal life. Those who wanted to escape the worst kinds of government attention, and who wished to maintain ritual and ceremonial customs as well as life on the land, with plenty of 'bush tucker', found many advantages in living on stations and working with horses, cattle and sheep. Time could be taken to slip away from the work or from the station itself, and into an Aboriginal territory and Aboriginal world. And pastoralists seem to have seen the advantage to themselves of this balance: a community of workers, living there, available to work long hours doing highly skilled jobs for little or no cash income. Government policy, missionary activity and economic changes from the creation of Western Australia until 1954 resulted in a continuous increase in the number of Aboriginal people who were destitute and despised.

Some of the Aboriginal men and women in Menzies who can speak of the complex and often terrible history of their people are standing, as sculpture, among the Gormley figures on Lake Ballard. We can look at them, and consider what it means to hold such stories, to have this accumulated experience, to be the mouthpiece for a history marred by extremes of racism and abuse. That side of the story cannot be forgotten. The other, more recent side of the history, with land claims and hopes of a better deal for Aboriginal people in the region, and in the nation, is also part of their experience. And the Aboriginal people who agreed to be scanned and modelled for the Gormley project did so with immense good humour. Ask them now what they think about the whole process and they roar with laughter and wish only that it be well received and well understood.

When Antony and I met with Paddy, Ron and Ralph at Lake Ballard, Ron asked Antony why he had chosen this particular place. Antony spoke of his wish to have a landscape that was open, large, inspiring. He used the language of aesthetics and art. Ron listened, then asked again, 'But why do you think you came here?' Antony answered with more thoughts about the geography, and the kind of landscape he thought the figures would need. Ron persisted, 'But what led you here?'

As I listened to this, I thought that Ron was looking for some reference to destiny, to the spiritual rather than practical or aesthetic explanation. The significance of this project must lie beyond matters of art from the Aboriginal point of view; we were there because we needed to be there, or because history needed us to be there. The need or the history were Aboriginal: the sculptures must take their place in the Aboriginal story - reflecting and addressing that story. Why else would Aboriginal people have agreed to strip naked and be scanned? Why else would this whole thing be taking place? And, more to the point, why else would Paddy have given permission for this to continue?

In Ron's mind, the project had to lead out of Aboriginal stories. As well as anyone else, Ron acknowledges that Aboriginal and white history, two or more kinds of story, commingle. Ron himself had a white father and was educated at the Mount Margaret Mission. He has worked as a mediator for mining companies in their dealings with Aboriginals who seek to ensure that sacred sites are protected, as well as having taken a leading role in title

cases in the Goldfields area. He is a claimant in the Wangkatha case; and a spokesperson in the Wutha claim. His story leads back to Aboriginal life, but also into the lives of miners and pastoralists.

Aboriginals live within a large, frontier community, as well as apart from it. As we look at the figures on the lake, we cannot be sure which is and which is not Aboriginal. But half of them are; this is Aboriginal land first and foremost. Land that has been walked for millennia of indigenous life; and land that has been taken and to some extent transformed by colonists. Aboriginal life, throughout living memory, has required, and even depended upon, an entanglement with white Australians. The figures on the lake are entangled, one with another.

Aboriginal Australia evokes a vastness of time and geography; and Aboriginal societies have managed their land and resources in order to keep them, as much as possible, intact, as they have always been. This is the profound conservatism of the hunter-gatherer. Colonial Australia speaks to much shorter spans of time, more specific bits of geography and radical attempts to transform and manage the land. This is the radicalism of farmers. Here lies a dichotomy in human experience: two different and opposed ways of being on this earth.

In reality, in the complications and transformations of modern Australian history, Aboriginal people have played their parts inside the frontier - threatened, changed and to some extent shaped by it. The successes and failures of these campaigns have consequences for Aboriginal life everywhere. In recent years, Aboriginal society has also moved in a global arena of indigenous rights and tide. Aboriginal peoples around the world have created alliances, political lobbies and the shared project of alerting all nation states to the needs and rights of indigenous peoples.

Linked to the place by the oldest of ties, and informed by stories about the land that reach far back in time and great distances across the region, Aboriginal people in the Menzies area are inseparable from its history. Linked to the outside white world - by the shifting priorities of government policy, changes in economic condition and human rights campaigns in Europe and North America - Aboriginal life in and around Menzies is also tied to national and global events. The arrival of land claims in Australian politics is a result of debates in Geneva, court cases in Canada and campaigns in the Amazon rainforest. The Wangkatha and Wutha claims in and around Lake Ballard are allied - consciously or unconsciously - to analogous processes in many other parts of the world. We can think about the Aboriginals who now live in Menzies for their links to another kind of culture, a heritage reaching back, far longer than any colonial story; but we also have to see them within these other communities, a part of a society that came to be called Australia, and defined by its relationship to many other such nations.

From boom to bust and back again

The mining boom had looked as though it would spawn a network of permanent towns; Australia would follow the gold seekers into the western desert. But bust followed boom. By 1930, the mines around Menzies were in the doldrums. People were leaving. The total number of children in the school fell to twenty; two of the classrooms were sold off.

Menzies is now a tranquil little place - except, perhaps, on Friday and Saturday nights when the two bars of the one remaining hotel can burst into modestly drunken, entirely modern noise. Some of the Menzies buildings do evoke a different era. The old hotel, though reduced in all ways from a former grandeur, stands on its original site and is still a place to have your gold weighed and bought. The municipal building, with an elegant facade and fine doorway, stands on the main street. One of its ground-floor rooms is now a library and archive, with many documents from the boom era in rough-and-ready order, a collection of old photographs on the walls and photo albums lying on cabinets of files and documents - an inchoate testimony to another era. The railway line still passes through the edge of the town, and a good if narrow highway leads through the middle of it. There is a scatter of houses around, with a row of small homes built in a short line to one side of the town for Aboriginal families. In 2002, the total population was just 110.

But the gold-mining frontier itself did not die; rather, its character changed. Small, short-term mining replaced the large, vast undertaking. And individual prospecting with a metal detector became a part of life throughout the region. The Eastern Goldfields continued to nurse dreams of bonanzas - smaller ones, perhaps, but nonetheless important. So the movement of men over the land searching, testing, digging. Within a short walk of the shores of Lake Ballard, prospectors continue to appear and disappear; holes are sunk into the granite and gravel; new seams are found, mined and left. And every weekend, a few men, and sometimes whole families, wander back and forth, much in the style of the hunter-gatherer, following hunches, intuitions and whatever facts can be gleaned ahead of time, waving the sensitized saucer of their metal detectors over swathes of rock and scrub, listening for the vital buzz in the headphones.

The more serious end of the mining industry in the Menzies area depends on the minimal quantity of gold that can be processed out of ore. For short shafts or small pits, with a mine life of up to six months, five or six grams per ton is the break-even level. The Riverina area mines, just to the south-west of Lake Ballard, have yielded up to 15 grams per ton. But the pockets of rich ore appear to be small; the search for them is difficult, and their lifetime is quite short. To find them, miners have been using a grid of about 200 metres square, and making systematic exploratory test drillings throughout. In 2001-2, this resulted in three new active mining leases near Menzies, two others near Kookynie and one a hundred kilometres farther to the east.

Pastoralists have been less successful. The Finlaysons sold their Jeedamya homestead in 1999. They were bought out by a mining company. So were other stations around Lake Ballard. Miners can survey, test drill and develop ore deposits without having to negotiate with pastoralists' interests. And they can hire a manager, run some stock and think of themselves as spreading their economic lives. In reality, say people like Kath Finlayson, this change of ownership means that the careful pastoralism and agricultural wisdom that once protected the land have gone. Pastoralists from the old school say that now feral goats abound, as do feral cats and dingoes, while awareness of what level of grazing one or another part of a station can bear has more or less disappeared. They also say that Aboriginals who once looked to pastoralists and the stations for work, as home for their families and as a way of balancing ancient customs with employment at the white frontier, have suffered nothing but loss as a result of the equal-rights and fair-pay campaigns fought in their names. Once pastoralists were forced to pay equal wages to their Aboriginal workers, the old system of family support ended, and many Aboriginal families were soon forced off the land and into the grim, destitute and alcoholic fringes of towns. The pastoral community of white leaseholder and cheap labourer families was broken. The mining frontier, they say, is able to seize all.

Memory and nostalgia now lie inside pastoral Australia. The pastoralists among the Gormley figures can stand on Lake Ballard thinking of what this place once meant for them; their gaze can look out at the salt surface of the lake, recalling the occasional, dramatic arrival of banded stilts and the recurrent, routine chase after stray animals in the distance, or towards the shores where their stations once constituted a whole system of life - for themselves, for their little villages of Aboriginal workers and for tens of thousands of domestic animals. In their minds' eyes, as they survey this open landscape - so still, so beautiful to outsiders - they see change and imbalance and loss.

As Antony and I drove towards the western desert, I asked him about how he saw the INSIDE AUSTRALIA project. He talked not about the genesis of his sculpture, but about the origins of sculpture itself. He spoke of 'the first gesture of sculpture' in which a stone upright activates a place, giving meaning and consciousness, making a human something out of a natural nothingness. In this way, he said, sculpture 'animates'; yet it is also static, and we have to accept its two qualities: inertia - a body that never moves, and often lies down on the earth - and silence - the sculpture, though giving meaning to place, is mute.

'Stillness and silence. And what we have to do is make stillness and silence count', he said. 'Make a body that in a way is like death; willingly go to the place of death and inertia, and then be released into the other side. That's what I'm interested in.'

So he finds Lake Ballard, from the air. A place of immense beauty and yet indifferent? With the stillness and silence of nature? He was aware that Aboriginal peoples will have known this place as their land, as a social and cultural space. But from the air, and perhaps also from the land, when visiting for the first time, there are few signs of human presence. A timelessness, rather. Antony had read that in this part of Australia there is faultline of limestone rock, with outcrops that are approximately 1.5 billion years old. Is it this silence that causes him to want to set up his figures, to leave his handprint on an apparent eternity, to make meaning in defiance of a sense of meaninglessness that vast spans of time cause us to feel?

I think not. From the beginning, Antony envisaged a community of figures. He may not have known what the community was going to be, quite who they were. But he was committed, from the start, to representing, in some way, their meanings, or the meanings their minds and lives give to Lake Ballard. They would stand vertical, and seem to stretch to a far, white horizon. The appeal of the salt lake came from this space and whiteness: figures could stand here with immense effect. Also, this wide, white world might be able to evoke something about the human condition: the eternity in which we stand, as minute structures, with strength enough just to stand. The condition of ultimate nakedness could be imagined here; and the extreme of the land scape could, as metaphor, as image, strip away not just our clothes, but also our gesture, our appearance. Antony's vision was a community of people at Lake Ballard whose internal selves, an inner core of human structure, would be visible.

Yet he did not imagine them as trapped in any ultimate silence no more so, this is to say, than is inherent to sculpture. Against the scale of Lake Ballard, even at full human height, they would be small; reduced to their cores, they would be black, steel, vertical, but appear as slender threads in the brilliant light. Yet they would have their stories. From the point of view of Australian history and Eastern Goldfields society, this is a sculpture project on a contested, not an empty space. The Gormley figures come from each side of the contest, representing a community whose combined experience and eruptive bitterness speak to much that is deep inside Australia.

This is also a project that raises questions about what Antony Gormley imagines, intends and fears for the work. The second night we camped at Lake Ballard, I asked Antony some of these questions about the INSIDE AUSTRALIA project. I put it to him that this was work that depended on people knowing rather a lot. He said, 'Maybe the first thing that has to be said is that reasonable art comes from a degree of reason, therefore you don't get good art without some form of good thinking.'

We break through the salt surface of the lake, get into the viscous mud, among the dormant brine shrimps, only when we begin to listen to the stories. So we may need to know at least some part of this, have some sense of what the figures are whispering, as we see and walk among them. So I asked Antony how he put together his sense that art is what the person looking does and an installation that has led him so far into a web of societies in and around Menzies. What does he want people to know in order to see this particular piece of work? He replied, 'I would like to say: all they need to know is to leave everything behind. A lot of what I have been trying to do in the work is about trying to leave myself behind. You might say that this is a rather elaborate distancing from the context - distancing, I mean, from the usual contexts in which you might find art: at home, in the museum, at the gallery, in the private collection, whatever. But the disengagement from natural habitat in the ecosystems of the art world is an attempt to avoid premeditation. So when you ask that question, I answer: the best thing that people can have with them is their eyes and their bodies and, I hope, a relatively open mind. And I think with this bit of the real world, which has temporarily, or for a longer time, taken possession of my work, will effect them. And I think if they just really look, I would like to feel that they need to know nothing.'

I was not sure that this was the complete answer. Antony himself had become more and more engaged with the people of Menzies, their histories, their societies. He may have begun the work by looking down from the window of a small plane onto a white and empty salt lake, a kind of blank canvas, whose glare and long horizons and apparent remoteness and emptiness suggested a perfect location for a spread of figures. His imagination may have been excited by images of steel, reduced sculptures on hard, white salt lake, and figures that would spread towards a seemingly infinite distance. But the project had led from a sense of a blank and perfect canvas to meeting men, women and children whose place in different kinds of history gives them particular kinds of relationships to the place. To go 'inside Australia', under the crust of the salt lake, is to get to know more and more about these people; and therefore to have an ever more detailed and enriched sense of who they are, where they come from; and thereby to begin to have ideas of what they represent. INSIDE AUSTRALIA is not a set of pure images; at least, if it exists to be looked at, it also can best be looked at through eyes with a mind that is informed by many kinds of knowledge. There was a moment when Antony and I were standing together at the top of Snake Hill, at the peak of the oldest of the seven sisters on the lake, looking out at the perfect site for his sculptures, when he said, 'I want to create a new kind of art, an anthropological art.'

I don't think that there has been anything 'too easy' about the INSIDE AUSTRALIA project. Not easy to make, not easy to know, and not easy to visit. To make the journey to Lake Ballard, to walk on the salt lake among the figures, to travel great distances - on the surface of the world, in history, and with the imagination - this is the commitment that Antony Gormley invites, but does not expect. He has made an intense and extensive exploration, of a medium and of a place. Perhaps you can leave everything behind, and arrive with the baggage shed, the mind open and the spread of figures there in front of you, amazing in an amazing landscape. And perhaps, in this state of mind, aware of being at an edge, under a burning sun, seeing the shapes, the colour, the lack of colour, the mind can dive inside Australia, finding an intuitive trail ben earth the surface, trusting to the power of work and place to act on the strange, ineffable human mind. This is a way of coming to the Lake Ballard project.

But if you will, you can also come here as historian and anthropologist. You can travel to each of the communities, follow the trails left by different kinds of history, and see inside the sculptures, and imagine their minds - stirring your own mind with thoughts about Australia, and yet having room, nonetheless, for the mind 's imaginative freedom. In this way the journey is a meeting of minds: yours with the work, and with the maker of the work, and with all that we can know about the people who stand, in effigy, on the lake. The figures on Lake Ballard are from one community - the people who live in or near Menzies. You can look at the figures and imagine them reaching back in time, to first steps taken on the lake; and with voices that could be heard and understood, relaying their stories, far across Australia. They stand still and isolated in a remote and silent place; they have links, in the mind's eye, with peoples and places hundreds of miles and thousands of years away. But between them Aboriginal and European together - they stand on many kinds of land, in all kinds of history, with various and rival stories. As you look at them and imagine their voices, perhaps you will hear both conflict and reconciliation. Either way, trusting to an innocence of view or looking to some forms of history and anthropology, when you

come to Lake Ballard and spend time with the Gormley sculptures, you will be able to think about what it means to stand inside Australia.