

The Mythology of Exploration: Australian Explorers' Journals

Paul Genoni

Australia, in common with other post-colonial nations, has an identity that is heavily influenced by the fact that the country and its indigenous people experienced a period of discovery, exploration and settlement by a colonising power. For Australia the period of exploration was particularly influential. This is due to the extended period over which it was conducted, its comparatively recent conclusion, the hostile and unreceptive nature of much of the land that was explored, and the substantial body of literature to which it gave rise. The explorer, through his deeds—both real and as rendered in his journals—has become an iconic figure in Australian life, and the mythology of exploration has emerged as a unifying element in the Australian imagination.

The initial exploration of Australia was conducted at the margins of the continent. From the mid-seventeenth century first-hand descriptions of a great southern continent began to reach Europe, as first Portuguese, then Spanish, Dutch, English and French maritime explorers returned to Europe with descriptions of the coastline of the previously unknown landmass. The published journals left by leaders of these coastal expeditions are the earliest firsthand accounts of the Australian landmass and they have become an integral part of the nation's literary heritage. From the first then, the exploration of Australia was a literary as well as a geographic enterprise.

As the outline of the continent was slowly sketched in, speculation intensified as to what forms of life and riches might lay in its interior. The physical exploration of inland Australia was, however, slow to commence after the first settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788, due to the substantial barrier formed by the Blue Mountains to the west of Sydney. A reliable pathway across the mountain range was not found until 1815, after which exploration was undertaken in earnest. The great period of inland exploration began with the journey of John Oxley in 1817 and continued until the crossing of the western deserts by David Carnegie in 1896-97. It took most of the intervening period to dispel any hope in the possible existence of an inland sea or any other hitherto undiscovered area of abundance in the central reaches of the continent.

Explorers had at their disposal two major tools by which they could reveal the land. The first was the physical journey they undertook, during which they ‘discovered’ the land by travelling where no European had gone before. The second was through the journals they wrote in order to provide an account of their explorations. In the journal the act of exploration was transformed into a text that recorded that land that was discovered and recreated the experiences of travel and discovery. According to Paul Carter (117), “the Australian explorer . . . made history twice over, first by his journey and then by his journal.” These journals, published in London and often accompanied by elaborate illustrations and maps, were written by every major inland explorer of the nineteenth century. As a result, during the almost one hundred years explorers were actively engaged in the physical discovery of Australia, they also made a substantial contribution to the country’s early literature.

The published journals were not the initial texts created from these journeys of discovery. The journals were based upon the field diaries that explorers were required to keep by the Colonial Office. The leaders of exploring parties were routinely provided with instructions from the Colonial Office on the keeping of adequate records and maps. These instructions stated that:

It is most desirable that any person travelling into the interior should keep a detailed Journal of his proceedings. In this Journal all observations and occurrences of every kind, with all their circumstances, however minute, and however familiar they may have been rendered by custom, should be carefully noted down; and it is also desirable that he should be as circumstantial as possible in describing the general appearance of the country, its surface, soil, animals, vegetables and minerals, every thing that relates to the population, the peculiar manners, customs, language, &c., of the individual natives, or the tribes of them that he may meet with. (Oxley 360)

The instructions continued to list the information required when recording climate, mountains, rivers, animals, vegetables and minerals.

The explorers' field diaries and journals were also of vital importance for the information they contained about possible economic benefits that could be derived from the land. The colonies not only had a need to find new agricultural land in order to feed the growing population, but they had also developed a strong commercial imperative which required

trade in order to profit both the colony and the empire. Such was the importance of trade that the Colonial Office required explorers to provide, “A circumstantial account of such articles, if any, as might be advantageously imported into Britain” (Oxley 361).

The nature of the explorers’ journals was substantially determined by the background of the men who wrote them. Of the major explorers of inland Australia only Hamilton Hume and John and Alexander Forrest were born in the colonies. All others were European born, and with the exceptions of the German Ludwig Leichhardt and Polish Paul Strzelecki, they were British. A number had military or naval careers before coming to the colonies, and many had continued in some form of government employ since their arrival. The explorers were therefore government men, who were pleased to be in the service of the British colonial power and eager to assist with the expansion of its influence.

It is therefore not surprising that the explorers’ journals were constructed in a manner that reflected the values and interests of the empire. The explorers ventured forth in order to annex the land on behalf of the British and colonial governments and related entrepreneurial interests. This task of annexation was crucial to the nature of the expeditions, and the explorers’ journals are now commonly read as being evidence of, and instruments in, the process of imperial expansion.

Central to the function played by the journals is that they recorded the ceremonies whereby the colonising power established its claims of ownership. When George Grey was deposited on the north-west coast in 1837, the first act recorded in his journal was that which claimed the land as British.

We here first hoisted the British flag, and went through the ceremony of taking possession of the territory in the name of Her Majesty and her heirs for ever.

(Vol I 89)

A lone flag set flying on remote shores unlikely to be visited again for many years, would in itself, be of little importance in claiming this previously unexplored part of the continent. However, recording that ceremony in a journal that reported the occasion to interested governments provided substantial weight to British claims of sovereignty.

The explorers’ journals also served the empire by recording many of the more subtle acts of possession as expeditions left their mark on the land and on the native people they

encountered. Camps were made and left, flags raised, places named, trees marked, seeds planted, gifts exchanged with Aboriginals, commemorative or religious ceremonies performed and companions buried, and these occurrences were faithfully recorded in the journals. In this way they became texts that signalled the intrusion into and appropriation of the land, as the explorers imported foreign customs and symbols into an alien environment, and marked their passage with the debris of travel. In turn the journals carried the record of the early stages of appropriation back to a waiting Europe, announcing that the land had been prepared for the advent of the empire.

The British and colonial governments were generally well served by these records. Not only did the journals fulfil their imperial purpose, but it was also the case that most of the explorers wrote quite capably, and a number of them very well. John Oxley (1820); Thomas Mitchell (1838); George Grey (1841); Edmund John Eyre (1845); Charles Sturt (1849), and Ernest Giles (1889), in particular wrote of their expeditions with style and insight. They were able to competently turn their hand to the numerous descriptive passages that were essential to the genre, but were also capable of writing more contemplative passages that were also expected as the heroes of imperialism encountered 'trackless deserts' populated by 'deceitful savages'.

The explorer's journals were widely read both in Australia and Europe. The interest shown within the colonies was to be expected. The role of exploration in discovering land of economic value was crucial to the well-being of colonial Australia. The public therefore followed the explorers' exploits with great interest, and they became amongst the nation's first heroes, with the departure and arrival of exploring parties being occasions for great celebration. In cases where disaster struck, as it did with the ill-fated expedition led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills in 1860-61, it was the cause of much anguish and soul searching.

That some individuals failed to return from these journeys—and in the instance of Ludwig Leichhardt's expedition of 1848, a whole party disappeared without trace—only added to the public fascination with the explorers. Those who did return usually carried tales of having suffered great hardship, and of having been tested by the land and its native inhabitants. The published accounts of these travails were eagerly awaited by the admiring

public and served to further enhance the sense of trepidation with which colonial Australians viewed their difficult land.

The explorers' journals were also followed closely in Europe. In addition to their obvious appeal to supporters of British imperialism, the journals also held a more general interest. The explorations they recorded were undertaken during a period when Europe had developed a fascination with the discoveries being made in the Pacific region. There was a realisation that—with the exception of the polar ice caps—the Pacific islands and the continent of New Holland (as Australia was then known) were the last regions of the world to be explored by Europeans.

The status of the explorers' journals and their place in Australian literature, have varied over the years. H. M. Green, in *A History of Australian Literature* was ambivalent about their importance but acknowledged that,

Australia's greatest explorers have mostly possessed, in varying degrees and kinds, some literary gift, [and] between them they contributed to the literature of the period a considerable body of descriptive prose. (Vol I 36)

Later analyses of the journals have looked beyond their role as “descriptive prose”, and examined them as texts that perform many of the functions common to more imaginative forms of writing, giving them a value distinct from their merit as historical documents. Robert Sellick wrote that:

The journals become a significant body of writing, remarkable not only for the wealth of practical information they convey but also for the way they recreate the experience of exploration and discovery. Behind this recreation there is a shaping and ordering, an imaginative power at work. (xi)

Sellick's opinion (55) that this is “a body of writing that demands to be considered as literature,” has been echoed by Ross Gibson who concluded (96), “these works ought to be analysed as effective imaginative literature . . . which contained literary characters, plots, themes and even symbols.”

In particular, it was by charting the gap between the imperial dreams and their own harsh experience of the inland that the explorers' journals acquired their deep and lasting hold upon the Australian consciousness. Colonial governments and settlers had imagined the continental interior into being long before it was explored. This speculation was largely

optimistic, based on the vastness of the area awaiting discovery and the apparently temperate latitudes in which the continent was situated. As Ross Gibson and Carol Lansbury have pointed out, there was a readiness to believe that the Australian inland would constitute an ideal site for expansion of the British Empire. For the most part, the reality of what the explorers discovered and reported was far removed from these utopian visions. The journals capture, often with remarkable clarity and immediacy, those very moments when Europeans came face-to-face with the reality that the Australian interior was a frequently hostile and alienating place. Separately, the journals articulate the experience of individual explorers coming to terms with the 'failure' that resulted from their encounter with this inhospitable environment. Collectively, they record the process by which the empire and the settler society abandoned their hopes for the inland and confined their dreams—at least temporarily—to the continental margins.

In some regards therefore, the imperial cause was indeed ill-served by the explorers' journals. In so far as they reported the state of the interior to the governments and to various agricultural and mercantile interests, the journals often undermined the imperial interests. The unwanted message of the journals was that the potential of the Australian continent was limited to the periphery, and they signalled that the physical and metaphysical occupation of Australia would be a slow and hesitant experience. The explorers permanently changed the way in which the Australian land, and the possibilities for life on the continent, were understood by its non-Aboriginal inhabitants; not only because their travels heralded the arrival of a new culture, but because what they wrote changed how those who were to follow them imagined and saw the land.

The journals were also notable in that they recorded the first contact with the Aboriginals of the interior. Many of these observations were of an anthropological or quasi-scientific nature, recording dress, speech, appearance and customs, but there were also numerous accounts of the interaction between the two parties. These interactions were sometimes friendly, but were frequently marked by distrust and suspicion and all too often ended in calamity. Clashes with Aboriginals were frequently made a centre-piece of the published accounts. They offered exciting material for both descriptive and illustrative purposes, and served to emphasise the difficulties faced by explorers as they sought to spread the benefits of 'civilization'.

In reporting such clashes the journals once again served to warn colonial and European readers that the Australian interior was not the natural site for imperial expansion that had been imagined. It was at best a problematic option, and governments and the public were given cause to believe that their interests were best served in the safer environments found at the margins of the continent.

* * * * *

Australian explorers have continued to occupy a significant place in the national imagination. This has been partly due to the ongoing place of the history of exploration in school curricula. For generations of Australian school children, following the dotted lines of exploration around, into, and eventually across the interior was the means by which they learnt both the history and geography of their island continent. The stories of discovery and heroism went hand-in-hand with images of vast expanses of wasteland, searing deserts and lakes of salt. In this way the explorers continued to help Australians achieve a sense of the place in which they live.

Another major element in the continuing presence of the explorer in the national imagination has been the ongoing literature of Australian exploration. In part this has been a continuation of a form of the explorer's journal. Exploration on a reduced scale continued sporadically into the twentieth century, as well-equipped scientific and anthropological expeditions travelled into areas of the continent that had never in some cases been visited previously by non-Aboriginals. They returned to publish accounts of their experiences that continued to add to the knowledge about the interior of the continent. These accounts mostly lack the dramatic impact of the earlier explorers' journals, but they nevertheless fed the remnant interest in the inland and extended a form of explorer literature into the twentieth century.

Intrepid travellers, as distinct from explorers or scientists, also began to visit the inland regions, and often did so with the intention of gathering material for the publication of adventure-travel books. These accounts of the interior provided a form of armchair exploration for readers whose lives were confined to the coast. Notable later accounts include J. W. Gregory's *The Dead Heart of Australia* (1906), A. G. Bolam's *The Trans-Australian Wonderland* (1923), Michael Terry's *Across Unknown Australia* (1925), and C. T. Madigan's *Crossing the Dead Heart* (1946).

There has also arisen the phenomenon of 'exploration' being undertaken as a search for those signs that remain of the original expeditions. Expeditions have been mounted in

order to follow the paths of explorers as closely as possible and sometimes attempting to duplicate the conditions under which the original journey was undertaken. The primary source used in reconstructing the routes and circumstances of the previous expeditions are the field diaries and journals left by the explorers. These later expeditions have in turn given rise to a small body of literature in which the experience is recounted as a latter-day explorer's journal. Examples include Tom Bergin's *In the Steps of Burke and Wills* (1981); Edward Stokes's *The Desert Coast: Edward Eyre's Expedition, 1840-41* (1993), and Kieran Kelly's *Hard Country, Hard Men: In the Footsteps of Gregory* (2000).

A related style of publication is that which recounts the tale of a particular expedition. Despite its flawed conception and tragic execution, the Burke and Wills expedition, more than any other, has been treated in this manner. In particular, Frank Clune's *Dig* (1937) and Alan Moorehead's *Cooper's Creek* (1963) reached large audiences and have been frequently reprinted. The ongoing appeal of the Burke and Wills expedition to the Australian imagination, and the need for successive generations to retell the story—most recently in Sarah Murgatroyd's *The Dig Tree* (2002)—is testimony to the awe with which Australians still contemplate the inland.

Another field of related publication has been, not unexpectedly, biographical studies of explorers. Most of the major explorers have been afforded at least one full-length study. Some of these have bordered on hagiography, but the Australian reading public has come to expect more sophisticated analyses of the explorers and their role in the public life of the emerging nation. The titles of volumes such as Geoffrey Dutton's *The Hero as Murderer: the Life of Edward John Eyre*, and Edgar Beale's *Sturt: the Chipped Idol* indicate the clear-eyed reappraisal that has been undertaken of these men and their abilities.

The position of the explorer in the national psyche has also had to withstand the development of new modes of historical study and analysis that have shifted the emphasis away from narratives which emphasised the triumph of settlement which had previously maintained the explorers' heroic status. An emerging emphasis on Aboriginal history and the process of dispossession recast the role of the explorers in such a way that they are now frequently viewed not only as the vanguard of an expanding civilization, but also as the pallbearers to another, and perhaps more legitimate, Australian society.

This contention over the role of the explorers has served to increase interest in their place in Australian history and literature. It has also had the effect of redirecting attention from the lives of the explorers towards an examination of the texts they left behind. Whereas previously biographers had used the journals in order to help reconstruct the details of the

expeditions, they are now scoured for what they reveal of the processes by which the land was travelled, signified and brought within the purview of the empire. Major contributions include Ross Gibson's *The Diminishing Paradise* (1984); Robert Dixon's *The Course of Empire* (1986); Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987); Simon Ryan's *The Cartographic Eye* (1996), and Roslynn Haynes' *Seeking the Centre* (1998).

Given this continuing interest it is not surprising that the original explorers' journals have also been consistently reprinted over many years. New editions, both scholarly and popular, have continued to find a market with scholars, libraries, collectors and the general public.

The influence of explorers and exploration on fictional writing has also been apparent, and was felt as early as the closing days of Australian exploration. The late nineteenth century saw a surge in the output of adventure romances involving the exploration of the new world. Many of these novels followed a formulaic plot, the key elements of which were a group of white explorers, a journey across daunting terrain in a foreign land, hostile black tribes often showing evidence of a formerly great civilization in decline, and an ultimate treasure in the form of gold or precious stones. Australia—with its vast and partly explored interior; native tribes with a history of clashes with white explorers, and gold deposits located in the remote inland—was fertile ground for such narratives.

In their Australian form these romance narratives have been referred to as 'Lemurian novels', a reference to the prehistoric continent of Lemuria that purportedly incorporated Australia and was supposedly home to lost civilizations (Healy; Dixon *Writing*). Such novels include J. F. Hogan's *The Lost Explorer* (1890); W. Carlton Dawe's *The Golden Lake* (1891); Ernest Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (1895); George Firth Scott's *The Last Lemurian* (1898); Henri Louis Grin's *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont* (1899), and Alexander MacDonald's *The Lost Explorers* (1907). Not only did a number of these novels feature fictional explorers as heroes, but it was also a common plot device for their paths to intersect with those of real explorers, such as Leichhardt and Giles.

The use of explorers and imagery derived from exploration has continued in Australian literature in the twentieth century and since. As Roslynn Haynes has demonstrated there has accumulated a considerable body of drama and poetry inspired by the deeds of the explorers. There is also a steady stream of fiction that has been influenced by the facts and myths of the exploration of the continent (Genoni). As Ross Gibson has concluded:

Writings such as Sturt's, Mitchell's and Eyre's . . . have influenced the formation of a national sense of identity, but they have become truly mythic only at second-hand and retroactively because their stories have penetrated the 'collective consciousness' through imaginative interpretations by modern writers. (xiii)

The most well known novel drawing upon the trope of exploration is Patrick White's *Voss*. The novel is a vital reworking of some of the myths derived from the exploration of Australia. White described the novel as being "possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading Eyre's Journal in a London bed-sitting room (and) the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions." (*Prodigal Son* 15) The expedition described in the novel has geographic and commercial goals, but from the start Voss's interest is elsewhere. He realises the lack of material value of the land he will cross, but nonetheless declares that he is "fascinated by the prospect before me. Even if the future of great areas of sand is a purely metaphysical one" (*Voss* 67). Voss sees his journey in transcendental terms, believing that his destiny is aligned with the "deserts of mysticism" and the "transfiguration of Christ" (*Voss* 367).

The use of explorer figures and thematic devices based upon the exploration of the country recurs in a number of more recent novels. These include Dal Stiven's *A Horse of Air* (1970); Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980); Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* (1982); Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988); Thea Astley's *Reaching Tin River* (1990); Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* (1991); Thomas Keneally's *Woman of the Inner Sea* (1992); Liam Davison's *Soundings* (1993), and Alan Attwood's *Burke's Soldier*.

The use made of explorer tropes in these novels is inventive and at times even playful, but also imbued with a respect for the origins of these tropes. The authors are aware that by drawing upon the explorers' experience they are invoking some of the most potent myths of the non-Aboriginal experience of Australia, and by recasting them for a post-colonial audience they are continuing the process by which these myths continue to accrue resonance and complexity.

Attuned to the nuances of post-colonial thought, these novelists use the mythic appeal of the explorer figure as a means of representing the search for a personal metaphysic based on the encounter with the alien land. There is an acknowledgment that the explorers, despite their adherence to imperial values that are now treated with caution, have been their predecessors in the search for the personal meanings of the great southern continent.

They have found in the explorers' journals—the stories they contain and the myths they gave birth to—a plentiful source of metaphoric and imaginative detail with which to enrich their own writing about the same space. In this way, the explorer continues to serve as a rich source from which to further the pursuit of that shibboleth of post-colonial cultures, the search for national identity.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Alan. *Burke's Soldier*. Camberwell: Viking, 2003.
- Beale, Edgar. *Sturt: the Chipped Idol*. Sydney: Sydney UP, 1979.
- Bergin, Tom. *In the Steps of Burke and Wills*. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1981.
- Bolam, A.G. *The Trans-Australian Wonderland*. Melbourne: Modern, 1923.
- Carey, Peter. *Oscar and Lucinda*. St Lucia, U of Queensland P, 1988.
- Carter, Paul. *The Road to Botany Bay*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Clune, Frank. *Dig*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1937.
- Davison, Liam. *Soundings*. St Lucia, U of Queensland P, 1993.
- Dawe, W. Carlton. *The Golden Lake*. Melbourne, E. A. Petherick, 1891.
- Dixon, Robert. *The Course of Empire Neo-classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788-1860*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1986.
- Dixon, Robert. *Writing the Colonial Adventure*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Dutton, Geoffrey. *The Hero as Murderer: the Life of Edward John Eyre*. Sydney: Collins, 1967.
- Eyre, Edward John. *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia and Overland from Adelaide to King George Sound in the Years 1840-1*. London: T. & W. Boone, 1845.
- Favenc, Ernest. *The Secret of the Australian Desert*. London: Blackie, 1895.
- Genoni, Paul. *Subverting the Empire: Explorers and Exploration in Australian Fiction*. Altona: Common Ground, 2004.
- Gibson, Ross. *The Diminishing Paradise*. North Ryde: Sirius, 1984.
- Giles, Ernest. *Australia Twice Traversed: the Romance of Exploration*. London: Sampson Low, 1889.
- Green, H.M. *A History of Australian Literature*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961.
- Gregory, J.W. *The Dead Heart of Australia*. London: John Murray, 1906.
- Grey, George. *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia*. London: T. and W. Boone, 1841.
- Haynes, Roslynn. *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Hazzard, Shirley. *The Transit of Venus*. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- Healy, J.J. "The Lemurian Nineties." *Australian Literary Studies*, 8.3 (1978): 307-316.
- Hogan, J. F. *The Lost Explorer*. London: Ward and Downey, 1890.
- Kelly, Kieran. *Hard Country, Hard Men: In the Footsteps of Gregory*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 2000.
- Keneally, Thomas. *Woman of the Inner Sea*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992.
- Lansbury, Carol. *Arcady in Australia*, Carlton: Melbourne UP, 1970.
- Madigan, C.T. *Crossing the Dead Heart*. Melbourne: Georgian House, 1946.
- Mitchell, Thomas L. *Three Expeditions Into the Interior of Eastern Australia: with Descriptions of the Recently Explored Region of Australia Felix, and the Present Colony of New South Wales*, London: T. & W. Boone, 1838.

- Moorehead, Alan. *Cooper's Creek*. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1963.
- Murgatroyd, Sarah. *The Dig Tree: The Story of Burke and Wills*. Camberwell: Viking, 2002.
- Oxley, John. *Journals of Two Expeditions Into the Interior of New South Wales, Undertaken by Order of the British Government in the Years 1817-18*. London: John Murray, 1820.
- Rougemont, Louis de, *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont*. London: George Newness, 1899.
- Ryan, Simon. *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Scott, George Firth. *The Last Lemurian*. London: James Bowden, 1898.
- Sellick, Robert. *The Epic Confrontation: Australian Explorers and the Centre, 1813-1900, a Literary Study*. PhD thesis [unpublished]: U of Adelaide, 1973.
- Stivens, Dal. *A Horse of Air*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970.
- Stokes, Edward. *The Desert Coast: Edward Eyre's Expedition, 1840-41*. Knoxfield: Five Mile Press, 1993.
- Sturt, Charles. *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia, Performed Under the Authority of Her Majesty's Government, During the Years 1844, 5, and 6*. London: T. & W. Boone, 1849.
- Terry, Michael. *Across Unknown Australia*. London: H. Jenkins, 1925.
- White, Patrick. "Prodigal Son." *Patrick White Speaks*. Sydney: Primavera, 1989.
- White, Patrick. *Voss*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957.