Colonial Coastlines: 'Unsettled' Settlements

RON BLABER

One of the most significant beach side developments in Western Australia has been Port Bouvard. It is a development south of Perth, located on the border of the Mandurah and Peel regions, and is now one of the fastest growing regions in Australia. In one sense it represents the border between the southern most extension of the Perth conurbation (Mandurah) and northern most region of the south west rural areas. For the most part Port Bouvard sits on and around the northern embankment of the Peel inlet which is the mouth of the Murray River. The Peel inlet has been subject to extensive engineering with significant reinforcement of the embankments and dredging of the inlet to prevent the build up of silt and the build up of nutrients in the river system. In other words, Port Bouvard represents a development conundrum. On the one hand the engineering work indicates that Port Bouvard is located within a fragile ecological system; on the other hand it is a development that is the epitome of postmodern desirability and beachside lifestyle. And it is this contrast that suggests that at least in the case of Port Bouvard that the return to the beach is not without its anxieties.

The name Port Bouvard functions in two ways. It evokes the French exploration of the South West coast, notably from 1772 to 1801 with the voyages of St Allouran, D'Entrecasteaux and Baudin. Port Bouvard takes its name from Cape Bouvard named by Baudin after French astronomer Alexis Buvard. Port Bouvard then maintains its ties to Australia's European history. More than this, though, Port Bouvard maintains a tie to European culture through its promotion as a place whereby people can enjoy a Mediterranean lifestyle. It reaches out to the French Riviera.

Local histories inform us that:

> [t]he first people known to have inhabited the area were people of the Bibbulmun tribe. These people lived well off the land, which abounded in fish, game, berries and fruits. The locality was known as Mandjar, which translates as 'meeting place.' After European settlement the name was adapted to Mandurah.[1]

Settlement began in the 1830s, following the establishment of the Swan

River settlement. From Perth, it was a day's journey by sea and a couple of days' journey overland. In the early years, provisioning came from outside and the settlement remained isolated until the 1850s. Nevertheless, the area developed a significant fishery with an accompanying cannery and later a timber mill that drew on the forests around Pinjarra. At the turn of the twentieth century Mandurah emerged as a holiday destination for people from the goldfields. By the 1920s the cannery and the timber mill had closed, and Mandurah settled into a small agricultural community boosted by a holiday season. In other words, it became a place to go for a holiday.

The current development can be read as a nexus between the colonial and the postmodern (or late-capitalism) and is marked by colonial erasure and post-modern celebration of lifestyle. Port Bouvard is divided into four precincts: Northport, Southport, Eastport and Bouvard Island. Northport is promoted as a place to relax or go surfing; Eastport as a place to relax or go boating; Southport as a place to relax or go golfing. The pressure is on; the overall promotion is ironically 'Do nothing and you could miss out'.
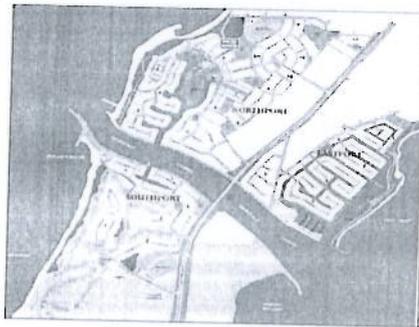
General Outline of Port Bouvard

The project is promoted by television and fishing identity Rex Hunt and, as expected, the beach and fishing are celebrated. However, the primary concern is the promotion of a lifestyle that erases the beach and the history of the site. As mentioned earlier, the developers want to sell Port Bouvard as a Mediterranean experience. Bouvard Island, a newly completed artificial island, is promoted as:

a truly unique lifestyle opportunity—the chance to live on your own island, with a private, secure access way, and your own private jetty and water access ... A variety of home styles are available, including elegant Mediterranean villas and studio apartments ... with design suitable for singles, couples and families. Building covenants will ensure housing is of the highest standard, and in harmony with the exclusive island atmosphere.

Forming the hub of the development is the recently finished Piazza, more properly
The Piazza. And, according to the developer the 'Mediterranean-style precinct' …
'generated total sales of over $8 million'. The nearby international standard golf
course features an 'up-market restaurant … The Mediterranean'.[2]

View of Island

The Piazza

Port Bouvard is a very expensive, massive engineering exercise. It involves
not only the creation of islands and canals, but also the optimisation of water
flows in order to prevent a return mosquito-infested wetlands, given that the
Mandurah-Peel region is estuarine. Overall, the development does not pretend
to take advantage of natural contours of the landscape. Port Bouvard is not sold
within the rhetorics of sixties and seventies suburban developments that led
to the Australian experience of conurbation along the coast. While it gestures
towards the idea of suburban village, it is sold as an up-to-the minute lifestyle
and/or leisure precinct, home to the aspirational classes, living precariously on
the credit boom, and to a semi-retired business community. It is seductive in a
kind of high-end Macdonaldisation.

However, the excess surrounding Port Bouvard signifies 'unsettledness' and a
lack of connectedness. It erases and writes over what has gone before. In reading

Douglas Sellicks *First Impressions of Albany, 1790–1900*, one can see the gradual disappearance of the Indigenous presence; they simply cease to exist in visitors' accounts. Similarly, the labour that went into making Albany is erased as visitors become more interested in what they can do there. In a sense, Port Bouvard does the same but in a much more compressed time period, and perhaps that is why it is unsettling. The beach almost disappears under the efforts to change the area into a lifestyle precinct.

Port Bouvard encapsulates a modern dilemma: the relation between work and leisure. From about 1840 onward in the West the beach has become a site of leisure; at Port Bouvard leisure has become lifestyle, ironically requiring a great deal of time, effort and labour. The beach compromises work and work compromises the beach.

How does the idea of the beach changes from the premodern to the modern? Alain Corbin, in the *Lure of the Sea*, reminds us that in premodernity, while Europe dwelled in a deistic universe in which the sea and the coastline were reminders of The Flood. Coastlines were the sublime ruins of the time before, and the beach was where the monsters of the deep, in their time of death, were cast ashore as a reminder of what dangers and evils lay beyond. The beach, then, often read positively as transitional space, has a longer and current history as a place of risk and perhaps a space of abjection. The beach may be a site of communication, whether of promise or threat—just what does that sail on the horizon mean? In its quotidian rhythms the beach is a site of arrival and departure, a gateway for the passage of people. But in the extreme, arrival is abandonment and departure is rescue, if one happens to be fortunate. In terms of colonial settlement the beach is unsettled in its purpose; it is a return or a reminder of the premodern. The colonial beach is a place of uncertainty.

To address these questions, we need to consider aspects of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the mythologisation of the Death(s) of James Cook, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, invoking a cultural chronology in which Cook's death comes first. *Robinson Crusoe* may have been written earlier, but *Crusoe* can be read as a type of postfiguration in relation to Cook's death on the beach at Kealakekua Bay on the island of Hawai'i on 14 February 1779.

Roy Edmund reminds us that in the mythologising of Cook's death lies an event that, in its singularity, brings together the encounter between the premodern and the modern; it signals the convergence of modernity and colonialism in which the tragic but triumphalist celebration of bourgeois and national ideas of science and progress jostle with a pure expression of modest heroism. Little wonder Cook 'was presented as a role model to generations of Victorian schoolboys, particularly the younger sons of large middle-class Victorian families who

had to leave home to better themselves'.[3] And in this regard Cook connects back to Crusoe and forward to Marlow.

Edmund makes three significant claims about Cook and his explorations. Cook's death 'became the founding event of colonial pacific history, that beginning which … is necessary if the European presence is to be justified and its usurping violence disavowed or suppressed'.[4] In the twentieth century his reputation was redeployed, 'particularly in the white settlements of Australia and New Zealand which adopted him as the founding father of their Anglo-Saxon nationhood'.[5]

In 1784 the Admiralty commissioned an extravagant account of Cook's third voyage, running to a cost of 4,000 pounds. Edmund notes that:

> [i]t was one of the earliest … examples of the state subsidizing publication of its discoveries. And to complete this assertion of national strength and identity through the launching of Cook as a national hero and prototype of the modern scientific explorer, the volumes were inscribed to the memory of 'The ablest and most renowned navigator this or any other country hath produced'.[6]

The significance of the Admiralty's action is that while it is clearly a celebration of Britain's colonial enterprise, it does so in modest fashion. What is important in this valorisation is the descriptor 'the ablest', pointing to the idea of work rather than conquest as the driving force behind British expansion. As a type of 'worker hero' drafted for the purposes of an expansionary bourgeois state, Cook through his life and death embodies the Aristotelian ideal of virtue expressed in the convergence of work and public service, which in turn acts as a disavowal of colonial usurpation and violence.

Edmund suggests that not only does Cook's death mark the beginning of colonial presence in the Pacific, but that also it breaks free from history. In general, it comes to mark colonial expansion expressed in the virtue of labour. It is this that allows us to consider Defoe, and Conrad and the Port Bouvard development in terms of the relationship between work and the beach. Paradoxically, while he may have been 'the ablest and most renowned navigator' and duly honoured for such work, as the cartographer of the colonial contact zone Cook is also something of a privileged beachcomber. The majesty of first landings gives way to the work of settlement in which case the contact zone, as Cook discovered on his return, is a precarious place. Work has to be done elsewhere. Part of this elsewhere is Crusoe's island.

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is an ur-colonialist text, an ur- text because while it represents the beginning of an expansionist project Defoe's Crusoe inhabits a transitional space as mercantile transforms to the colonial proper. In comparison

Conrad is clearly aware that, some 180 years later, he is writing within a colonial space. However, an immediate concern is with Crusoe's relationship to his island and its beach. Robert P Marzec reminds us that when Crusoe first sights the island 'he codes the land "more frightful than the Sea"'.[7] This encoding refers to the shore, and even more precisely the unknown and unknowable shore. At the height of the storm we are told:

> [a]s to making sail, we had none … so we work'd at the oar towards the land, tho' with heavy hearts, like Men going to Execution; for all we knew, that when the Boat came nearer the Shore, she would be dash'd in a Thousand Pieces by the Breach of the Sea. However, we committed our souls to God in the most earnest manner … we hasten'd our own destruction with our own hands, pulling as well as we could towards Land. What the Shore was, whether Rock or Sand, whether Steep or Shoal we knew not; the only Hope that could rationally give us the least Shadow of Expectation, was, if we might happen into some bay or Gulph … But there was nothing of this appeared; but as we made nearer and nearer the Shore , the Land look'd more frightful than the Sea.[8]

Crusoe here evokes that pre-modern sense of the shore as a dangerous and forbidding place, where people labour at risk and as a site where the malevolent may be washed up. After the shipwreck, apart from the necessity of getting supplies ashore, Crusoe's priority is to vacate to the interior, not to the fringes of the beach but to the interior proper. He says: 'My next Work was to view the Country, and seek a proper Place for my Habitation, and where to stow my Goods to secure them from whatever may happen'.[9] He is successful in this, finding 'a little Plain on the Side of a rising Hill'.[10] This is important for a number of reasons. For Crusoe the understanding of the beach as a place of threat is underscored by the fact that the interior has a familiarity about it; it is the place that can be made knowable and it is a place where work can be done. Virginia Birdsall argues that 'Crusoe is always attempting to bring the wild, the threatening, the chaotic under rational control—that is subject to his own mastery'.[11] Birdsall is correct, but this refers to the interior of the island; this cannot be achieved on the beach, which is subject to too much change and the threat of unpredictable visitation. And regardless of Crusoe's ability through work to extend his dwelling to property to estate to colony, this does not extend in the final analysis to the shore. Without rehearsing the rescue of Friday (rescued to the interior) and others, it can be generally understood that the shore, for Crusoe, always remains unsettled and unsettling.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the concern is not so much with the heart but with Marlow's reaction to the beach head. Conrad's Marlow embodies

modernity and colonialism. On the one hand, in being likened to a meditating Buddha, he literally embodies the colonial encounter; on the other hand he is driven by modernity's problematic assimilation of work, progress and civilisation. For Marlow, work and the colonial project are convergent if not coincident. And significantly, as with Crusoe, work can only take place and should only take place in the interior; Marlow tells us that his work begins some 200 miles inland from the shore. For a man of the sea, this sounds problematic but we see that Marlow indeed is unsettled by the colonial shore, for a number of reasons. First, because it is unknowable; and second because it is a place of trade, of exchange, which for Marlow does not appear to rate as work because trade does not mesh with progress and a civilising mission.

In terms of the shore, there are three significant events for Marlow pointing to the disturbing nature of the beach. In his encounter with the French man-of-war, Marlow provides a description pointing to Colonial indolence and purposelessness. There is a sense of an infectious incomprehensibility. The coast cannot be known and this leads to incomprehensible action—if you do not understand the space, how can what you do have any meaning? The lack of intent and the accompanying laziness is what disturbs Marlow:

> Once … we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there and she was shelling the bush … Her ensign drooped limp like a rag, the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull, the greasy slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. In the empty immensity of earth, sky and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns … and nothing happened. Nothing could happen.[12]

More tellingly Marlow's account invokes the post–Flood world that Courbin describes, and we feel a dread and a fear of the unknown and the unknowable. The shore is not somewhere one would wish to spend much time:

> We called at more places with farcical names where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get particularised impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.[13]

Disturbingly, this unsettling contact zone projects thirty miles up river to the company station, marked, as we know, by pointless busyness, waste and brutal exploitation that reduces the local people to mere spectres haunting the colonial coast.

The point is that despite the ritualistic grandeur of the landing characterising the work of the explorer, thereafter the colonial coast is not necessarily a nice place to be. We might need to move on to consider the precariousness of the various settlements in Australia, long dependent on supplies until passage into the hinterland allowed for work to be truly undertaken.

However, at the same time the colonial coast was viewed with trepidation, the beach at home was undergoing a change. Courbin notes that from 1750 to 1845 pictorial representations of the beach shifted from representations of the people and the precarious work of the shore line to representations of aristocratic and bourgeois figures undertaking amateur collections and then to figures strolling along the promenade or perhaps walking the beach. He argues at the same time that we see the beach and the sea prescribed as places of healing and restoration. In the first instance, if one could afford it one would go to the beach resort or spa to take in the air, and, a little later in this process of transformation, perhaps take to the waters. Still later the beach becomes a place of leisure, entertainment and ultimately the emergence of the beach as a holiday place, a place distinct from and limited by work and domestic space. This transformation is exported later to the colonial settlements as they become imbricated in the relationship between work and leisure.

Thus, in modernity, the beach has various configurations. The first is the lingering but powerful pre-modern figure of the beach as a place of risk. However, by the mid-nineteenth century the beach enjoys a colonialist transformation, as it becomes a place for aristocratic rest and restoration as, for example, at Brighton, while in Blackpool or St Kilda or Manly it becomes a democratised and proletarian space. The key sense of the beach here is that it is the special place of the holiday. In our contemporary, postmodern times, often signalled in the memory 'we used to go to Christies Beach or Point Perron for a holiday', the beach has come adrift as a holiday place and become entangled, as seen in the Port Bouvard development, in the concept of lifestyle, but in so doing it appears to gesture back to the unease of the premodern. The aftermath of the Flood still marks the colonial shore, the phantasmic image of the flood that was and is colonialism. No matter the work done to transform, hide or disguise that feeling, the unsettledness remains.

Notes

1 http://www.Mandurah.wa.gov.au/council/history 5/12/2005
2 ttp://www.portbuvard.com.au/pbsite 5/12/2005
3 Roy Edmund, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gaugin* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 41.
4 Edmund, *Representing the South Pacific* 23.
5 Edmund, *Representing the South Pacific* 24.
6 Edmund, *Representing the South Pacific* 30.
7 Robert P. Marzec, 'Enclosures, Colonization, and the Robinson Crusoe Syndrome: A Genealogy of Land in a Global Context', *boundary 2*, 29.2 (2002): 129.
8 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton, 1975) 27.
9 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 43.
10 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 48.
11 Virginia Birdsall, *Defoe's Perpetual Seekers* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1985) 27.
12 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (NewYork: Norton, 1988) 17.
13 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 17.

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