

# The Outback Within



# The Outback Within:

## *Journeys into the Australian Interior*

By

Mark Byrne

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By Mark Byrne

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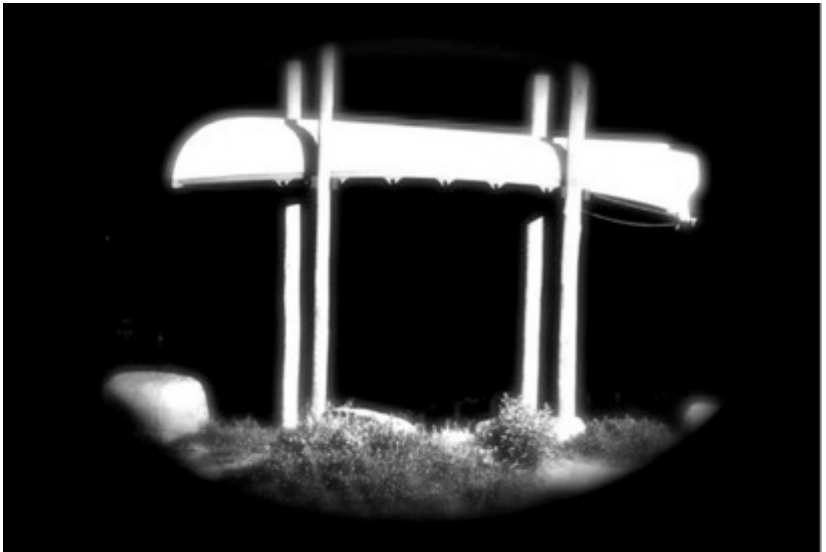
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For Alicja

“You can put your shoes under my bed...”



Replica of Sturt's whaleboat, Tibooburra, NSW

Go forth, my book, and show the things  
Pilgrimage unto the pilgrim brings.

—John Bunyan<sup>1</sup>

Gandalf: You'll have a tale or two to tell when you come back.

Bilbo: And can you promise that I will come back?

Gandalf: No.

—*The Hobbit*<sup>2</sup>

But you'll never see the end of the road while you're travelling with me.

—Neil Finn<sup>3</sup>

Dorothy: Now which way do we go?...

Scarecrow [points both ways]: Of course, people do go both ways.

—*Wizard of Oz*<sup>4</sup>

...we must expect the desert.

—Dom Helder Camara<sup>5</sup>

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## PREFACE

When I was a small boy, I slept under a large wall map of Australia. Standing on my mattress, I could read more and more of the tiny names on it as I grew up. One day I noticed a dotted line arcing across the north of the continent. I looked closer. The only two words I could make out were “Disappointment” and “McDonald”. I wondered who McDonald was, and why his disappointment was so great that it gave rise to this arc across the continent. Only years later did I realise that these are the names of two usually dry lakes that lie on the arc of the Tropic of Capricorn, and that I had mistaken the names of the lakes for that of the great arc.

But by then it was too late. Australia had already become a source of mystery to me. The map, so densely written upon on its wrinkly, watery margins, so sparse at its centre, became like a mandala to me. It was as if I saw myself in the map, and it in me.

This probably accounts for the many trips I have taken into the interior as an adult, mostly from Sydney, by car or motorbike, often alone and camping, with no fixed destination in mind. I confess that not only am I no heroic explorer seeking to discover and subdue an unknown continent, but also that I have a deeply ambivalent relationship with the outback. By nature more drawn to water, I sometimes feel oppressed by the heat, the dryness, the flies. And to recall Sartre, hell is other campers with generators.

On the other hand, there is quite a lot of water out there—well, enough to survive on, and maybe enough to swim in, too—if you know where to look. And there is nothing like endless miles of open road to empty the harried mind, or a quiet campfire under a shock of stars to remind yourself that, while you may be but a temporary aggregation of stardust, for tonight that’s ok.

So the desert draws me back. And inward: a much harder trip. For me, much of it has been around confronting the idea that *the centre is empty*. When the heroic approach to life fails, and we are left alone, bereft, with no compass or reason to go on: what then? This is the real, the unspoken question beneath the one with which this book is ostensibly concerned.

Writing this book, I have sometimes felt like Sturt trapped at Depot Glen, surrounded by pitiless barren desert in the grip of drought, with nowhere to go and dependent on Providence in the form of rain to make

my escape. Or Burke and Wills, tantalisingly close to the Gulf of Carpentaria but prevented by thick mangroves from dipping their toes in its briny tide. Or Robyn Davidson before she meets Eddie the Pitjantjatjara elder, despairing that her grand endeavour has come to nought, that all is empty and meaningless.

But this is the point. In asking about the meaning of death in the outback, we journey into our own desert places. By exploring the meaning of death in other people's narratives, I am also seeking to come to terms with emptiness—the absence of meaning, the death of hope—closer to home. How can we live a life of meaning if what we have inherited, what we are exposed to, the ground under our feet, seems bereft of it?

To some, such psychologising is anathema, an intrusion of solipsism and subjectivity that clouds the Apollonic eye of reason and historical veracity. To others, this interplay of the inner and outer worlds is the *sine qua non* of all writing save technical manuals and TV guides. So *The Outback Within* shifts in perspective between the landscape of the desert and that of the human soul, and between the individual and collective psyches. And it makes no pretence to objectivity. It is but one perspective among many.

\*

I always disliked my middle name, Stansmore, until, halfway through writing this book, I read the journal of the young English aristocrat David Carnegie. He was the last of the nineteenth century inland explorers. In the twentieth century, exploration became a relatively tame affair, thanks to motorised vehicles and radio communications. Carnegie's 1896-87 expedition from Coolgardie (near Kalgoorlie) to Halls Creek and back, a total distance of nearly five thousand kilometres, was the last of the unsupported horse and camel affairs over mostly unmapped territory. It is more famous (or infamous), though, for Carnegie's ugly habit of kidnapping local Indigenous people and forcing them to take his party to the nearest source of fresh water.

Much to my surprise, it turns out that one of my forebears, Charles Stansmore, was a member of that expedition. Three hundred kilometres north of Lake MacDonald, not long after crossing the Tropic of Capricorn and just days from the end of the outward journey, it seems that Stansmore tripped on a rock and lost control of his rifle while hunting kangaroos. It flipped over and discharged, firing a bullet into his chest just below the heart.

It seemed so hard, to die thus, the journey done, his share in the labour so nobly borne and patiently executed; the desert crossed, and now to be cut off on the edge of the land of promise! Ah well, it was better so than a lingering death in the desert, a swift and sudden call instead of perhaps slow tortures of thirst and starvation!<sup>6</sup>

Stansmore became the last nineteenth century explorer to die in the desert, only a few days after two members of the Calvert expedition perished not far away. Carnegie named a low range of hills south-east of Balgo (nowhere near where he died) in Charlie's memory. Save perhaps for its traditional owners and the nearest station owner, the Stansmore Range appears to be one of the least known or visited places in Australia or the world.

According to a recently reported study, if you want to predict how high up the greasy pole of worldly success a child will climb, you should look not so much to the trajectory of the parents' lives as back at least a century or more, three or four generations. From what I know of my family of origin, it makes perfect sense that my great grandfather, Charlie Stansmore—"one of the best and truest men that God ever blessed with life; such a fine manly character; so honest and generous",<sup>7</sup> according to Carnegie—went on a long expedition pretty much from nowhere to nowhere and which found nothing much of note on the way. Or that he died innocently but ingloriously only days before it reached its destination; albeit, according to Carnegie, with a smile on his face. No matter that my genes are only one-eighth from his line. Disappointment, we've still got lakes of the stuff. At the risk of grandiosity and romanticism, my job may be to prove that biology is not destiny. To finish Charlie's journey, in a sense.



## INTRODUCTION

To enter that country is to be choked with dust, suffocated by waves of thrumming heat, and driven to distraction by the ubiquitous Australian fly; it is to be amazed by space and humbled by the most ancient, bony, awesome landscape on the face of the earth. It is to discover the continent's mythological crucible, the great outback, the never-never, that decrepit desert land of infinite blue air and limitless power.

—Robyn Davidson<sup>8</sup>

How is it, that in all these exploring expeditions a lot of people go and die?<sup>9</sup>

Stockman Alfred Gibson asked this question of explorer Ernest Giles on 20 April, 1874, while they were riding through the desert that would later bear Gibson's name. It was the thirteenth anniversary of Burke and Wills' ill-fated return to their depot at Cooper's Creek in 1861, missing by only a few hours the relief party that had left that very morning to return south to Melbourne. Gibson, like William Wills, had a brother who joined Sir John Franklin's expedition to the Arctic in 1845. None of Franklin's party survived.

Giles replied to Gibson by cataloguing the many ways that a man might die in the process of exploring desert regions, before concluding that death "is a thing that must occur to every one sooner or later".<sup>10</sup>

Two days later, Gibson pushed ahead alone on Giles's horse, Fair Maid of Perth, in search of water after their other "big ambling" horse, Badger, dropped dead of thirst and exhaustion. He took Giles's only compass, too, though he had no idea how to use it. Giles called out after him "to stick to the tracks", but Gibson, horse and compass were never seen again—although Carnegie reports in 1896 that

I have heard that months after Giles's return, Gibson's mare came back to her home, thin and miserable, and showing on her belly and back the marks of a saddle and girth, which as she wasted away had become slack and so turned over.<sup>11</sup>

Gibson himself reappears in 1899 in *The Adventures of Louis de Rougemont, as Told by Himself*. The author, a noted hoaxer, claims to

have met him in central Australia in 1876, two years after he disappeared, and to have been present at his death. According to de Rougemont, Gibson whispered:

‘I think the voices of my friends are calling me... I can hear them singing, and they are calling me away. They have come for me at last!’ His thin face brightened up with a slow, sad smile, which soon faded away, and then, giving my hand a slight pressure, he whispered almost in my ear, as I bent over him, ‘Good-bye, comrade, I’m off. You will come too, some day.’ A slight shiver, and Gibson passed peacefully away.<sup>12</sup>

Gibson’s “small bay mare” also comes briefly back to life in Dal Stevens’ 1971 Miles Franklin award-winning novel *A Horse of Air*. She bears the narrator, amateur ornithologist Harry Craddock, to safety when he is stranded, lost and alone, in the same desert nearly a century later while on his quest to discover the holy grail of Australian ornithology, the elusive night parrot.<sup>13</sup> But the horse’s modern resurrection and brave act were to no avail. On the last page of the book, before he ever encountered the night parrot, Craddock steps out of an Adelaide pub:

‘Time pulls the trigger,’ he said when leaving. We were standing on the footpath...  
He stepped out onto the road. I don’t think he saw the truck that hit and killed him.<sup>14</sup>

\*

Taken at face value, Gibson’s question might seem naive. The Australian outback and the Arctic are still among the most inhospitable places on earth, and the mechanics of dehydration, heat exhaustion, malnourishment, scurvy, dysentery and food poisoning, not to mention spear and bullet wounds, are well known. But it might also be an expression of lingering grief over the loss of his brother. Or it might be existential. What is the point of exploring if it ends in death? What would make the sacrifice worthwhile? How much must one achieve in life before death can be met with equanimity?

The question is not Gibson’s alone. Since the early 1830s, outback journeys in literature, art, film and the mass media have been suffused with the aura of death. Impending or averted, fated or random, in fiction or history, it is as omnipresent as the heat, flies and red dirt. Perhaps the answer to Gibson’s question is more than practical. There may be more to it than people, real or fictitious, coming to grief in a hard land because

they got lost or ran out of water or were killed by Aborigines in the dead of night or by the slip of their own rifle in a moment of carelessness.

In trying to answer Gibson's question, we might learn something about our relationship to the land and ourselves. Take that simple euphemism, "coming to grief". The outback is a place not only where people die, but also where they come to know grief; that is, where they learn how to live with the presence of death in their lives.

\*

We will be going on a journey into the Australian soul using journeys to the outback as our guides. More specifically, this book focuses on mythological themes, especially death and rebirth, in outback journeys in literature and film.

Because it is so closely connected to the cycles of human, animal and plant life, death and rebirth has been a central theme of ancient and modern myths and rituals. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep was among the first to recognise the central role of experiences of symbolic—as opposed to literal or physical—death and rebirth in rites of passage in traditional societies, and the three stages common to these processes: separation, liminality and reassimilation.<sup>15</sup>

Another anthropologist, Victor Turner, paid close attention to the central or liminal stage of rites of passage. He emphasised how often rituals involve the symbolism on the one hand of death—decomposition, catabolism, burial, being stained black or painted white—and on the other of gestation and new birth:

...the neophytes [initiates or pilgrims] are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of paradox and ambiguity, a confusion of all the customary categories.<sup>16</sup>

So while being confused, lost, lonely, disappointed and the like may appear to be negative states from the perspective of normal reality, they might also indicate that one is going through a rite of passage.

Rituals involving these three stages most often occur around to the major life events—birth, puberty, marriage and death—in traditional societies, but others have applied this way of thinking to modern, supposedly secular societies as well. The central message is that to move from one stage of life to another, one must die to the old way of life and spend time in limbo "betwixt and between" the old life and the new, before emerging with a new direction in life.

Going through a symbolic death and rebirth is not the only way that people change. They may metamorphose from one state to another, like caterpillars into butterflies, or like the characters in Ovid's stories who become animals, inanimate objects, even a constellation. Another transformative process that outback travellers sometimes experience is shedding, the stripping away of comforts and burdens as they progress further and further into the interior. There are many other ways of imagining how people change: a gradual or sudden awakening or enlightenment, learning from past mistakes, the patient acquisition of new knowledge from others... it's a long list.

Death and rebirth is the central theme of *The Outback Within* because the stages of a journey—leaving home, entering into a new world and eventually returning to the realm of the familiar—are such an obvious fit with the stages of a rite of passage. As historian Eric Leed puts it,

...the most important transitions we experience are written into our journeys, which make of our lives a procession and spectacle more engrossing and transforming than any ritual could possibly be.<sup>17</sup>

By leaving home, entering an in-between or liminal world, being changed by the experience, and returning to the known world, we sometimes directly confront death for the first time, or in new guises, from passing roadkill to a dying beggar. More important, though, is the way the process of travel stimulates a symbolic or “little” death within us as we leave our familiar world and enter a new one filled (hopefully) with uncertainties.

This is critical to the process of personal and cultural development. As the saying goes, to find oneself one must first lose oneself. Or as German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr puts it, one cannot know oneself or one's culture without first losing it, without crossing the boundary that ordinarily separates us from the dead, the spirits, and the animal powers of the wilderness:

A man could not become a true knight until he had lived in the wilderness. Only a person who had seen his ‘animal part’, who had ‘died’, could consciously live in culture.<sup>18</sup>

The idea that one must die in order to live is heresy in a culture which pretends that success in life is a matter of progressive acquisition: possessions, partners, children, accolades, experiences. It is also why the outback presents such a challenge. Robyn Davidson calls it Australia's mythological crucible. Like an alchemist's crucible or even the humble



kitchen pot, it is where we often cook up new visions of ourselves, usually after losing our previous form and often at great cost. The outback traveller is frequently in an uncomfortable place, betwixt and between their old life and a new one. They are lost, at a loss. Their situation appals and entrance us, because on some level we recognise that where they have gone, we need to go too—if not literally then metaphorically.

\*

In a 1961 essay, poet Judith Wright gave us perhaps the best answer yet to Gibson's question.

Are all these dead men in our literature a kind of sacrifice? And just what is being sacrificed? Is it perhaps the European consciousness—dominating, puritanical, analytical—that D. H. Lawrence saw as negated by this landscape? Reconciliation with the place is a matter of death; the death of the European mind, its absorption into the soil it has struggled against.<sup>19</sup>

I understand Wright to mean that settler Australians won't really belong here until they let go of the "dominating, puritanical, analytical" way of thinking we have inherited from our European ancestors; and that the plethora of narratives of death in the outback reflect the inevitability of this process.

Wright seems to suggest that sacrifice leads inevitably to reconciliation. But is this true? Self-sacrifice may be noble and for the common good, or it may be egotistical ("Look at me!") or reveal nothing more than a weak ego desiring annihilation. And since death in the outback has been a part of our literary tradition for nearly two centuries and continues to this day, Wright's answer begs the question: Why is it still an Australian obsession? How much death do we need before the sacrifice is complete?

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In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell drew on his encyclopaedic knowledge of world mythology to propose the existence of a universal "monomyth" that is also a rite of passage:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.<sup>20</sup>

Campbell's idea of a universal "hero's quest" open to anyone provided a roadmap for young postwar Westerners on their quests for self-knowledge beyond the confines of institutional religions. But his monomyth has also been widely criticised, especially by academic anthropologists, folklorists and historians sceptical of universal claims and theories. Above all, his claim that all myths are hero myths simply isn't true.<sup>21</sup> Aboriginal dreaming stories, for one, are free of ancestral figures who conform to Campbell's formula. Nevertheless, his idea of a more or less universal myth that is also an individual rite of passage is important to this book because it just doesn't work in Australia.

To explain why, a short digression is needed. The ongoing interest in Campbell's theory is thanks mostly to a seven page memo written in the mid-1980s for executives at Walt Disney Pictures by screenwriter Christopher Vogler, later expanded into several editions of *A Writer's Journey*. Vogler applies Campbell's monomyth to a range of movies from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Star Wars*, none of which were written with Campbell in mind (although George Lucas read *Hero* before completing the final draft of the first *Star Wars*). He argues that the success of these films can be attributed to the fact that they express some core human themes or storytelling truths that are embodied in the monomyth.<sup>22</sup>

This is thanks to the coincidence of the traditional three-act screenplay (exposition, rising action and resolution) and the three stages of a rite of passage (departure, initiation and return). The hero or heroine's normal life is upset by a threat to themselves or their world, or by or the need to discover the answer to a long-hidden secret. They reluctantly set out on a quest, aided by children, animals, spirit beings or a wise old man or woman. They encounter evil forces, and while initially defeated by them, learn from their mistakes and eventually triumph. They return to the ordinary world as wiser beings, with the answer to the secret, having found their true love, or with the peace of their community guaranteed.

According to Vogler there are two places in the world where this formula doesn't work. One is Germany, where the idea of the hero is too closely bound up with ideas of Aryan supremacy and the Nazi legacy to be comfortable for modern writers and their audiences. The other is Australia. Vogler postulates that this is because the idea of "heroic virtue" has been "used to lure generations of Australian males into fighting Britain's battles".<sup>23</sup> Alternately, it could be because our convict heritage and the myth of the outback have made it impossible for the hero myth which dominates European and American cultures to prosper here.

Before setting off we need to establish our bearings. First of all, what do we mean by the outback? It has no clear boundaries, but for most of the last century or so has been thought of as at least as large as the deserts that cover one-third of the Australian continent. It is not the same as “the bush”, which usually refers to more temperate, watered and thickly vegetated country between the coast and the desert.

The term “Out Back” seems to have first been used in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (alongside Out Beyond), and as the single word “outback” not until 1936. Even in some of these early uses we see its association not just with what lies behind or beyond the settled coastal fringe, and with the deserts, but also with despair and death on the one hand, and hope and freedom on the other. As Henry Lawson famously wrote in *The Bulletin* in 1893,

We wish to Heaven that Australian writers would leave off trying to make a paradise out of the Out Back Hell... What's the good of making a heaven of a hell when by describing it as it really is, we might do some good for the lost souls there?<sup>24</sup>

The reality is that, while the deserts can be mapped, the outback remains, as Patrick White famously put it, a “country of the mind”. It is the desert internalised, imagined, mythologised. The desert is a place; the outback is an idea. It is like our idea of “home”; tied to memories of real places, but as much a product of our fantasies and fears. It can also represent our internal “desert places,” to quote the title of Robyn Davidson’s dystopian sequel to *Tracks*. When we travel to the outback rather than just to the desert, the journey may be as much psychological or spiritual as geographic and temporal.

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Next, what is our frame of reference, our language, our compass? This book invokes the language of mythology. Myth here means not a sacred text, a mass illusion or an “empty signifier” but the deep stories all cultures fashion and tell to make sense of their worlds. Stories of the beginning and end of time; of the first humans and the foundation of cities and empires; of the origin of laws and customs; of evil and death and life thereafter; and so on.

A mythic approach enables us to look at what two centuries of narratives—some factual and historical, others fictional and recent—might have in common. Like dreams, myth obeys its own rules, the first of which is that it is collective rather than individual. It is the mass or public

equivalent of individual dreams; and like dreams, myth is not all-good nor all-bad but both and neither, encompassing the full spectrum of human imagination and action in story form. The only “bad” myth is the one that remains unrecognised and unreflected upon, since it is likely to influence our attitudes and behaviour unconsciously. And as with quantum physics or dreams, we can’t understand a myth without entering into its world. But in doing so, we also change it and are changed by it. This is what Jung meant by “dreaming the myth onward”.

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Our guides on this journey will be nearly two centuries of narratives in literature and film of journeys to or in the Australian interior, with a bias towards more recent ones.<sup>25</sup> Novels and films (and to a lesser extent expedition journals, which are no mere factual record but are filtered through the author’s imagination and the audience’s expectations, not to mention the publisher’s demands) are like collective dreams. As film director George Miller puts it,

When we congregate with strangers in the darkness of the cinema it’s a kind of public dreaming... Cinema is a hi-tech manifestation... of a story-telling tradition that is as old as humankind. Our movies are the songlines of settlers’ Australia, and like the songs of the Aboriginal creation fathers they sing us into being.<sup>26</sup>

It is the same with literature. We usually regard individual narratives as expressions of their creators’ imaginations. But together they might also tell us something about our collective psyche—especially where they have proven popular, enduring or inspirational. Sometimes, though, an obscure or rejected work can be a harbinger of a forgotten and peripheral or emerging future mythic theme.

Why focus on journeys in literature (including historical narratives) and films but not (with one exception) other arts such as painting? Because writing most easily accommodates the narrative form, and most feature films are based on screenplays that follow narrative conventions like exposition or introduction, rising action, climax and falling action or denouement.

Why no Aboriginal journeys? This book is written by a settler Australian about and for his ilk. As writer Carmel Bird puts it, “The meanings and qualities and purposes of Aboriginal stories are different from those of non-Aboriginal stories generally.”<sup>27</sup> It is settlers who have had trouble adapting to the Australian deserts, settlers who have been

accused of ostensibly having no Dreamings,<sup>28</sup> and settlers who have not yet properly come to terms with what we have done to Aboriginal people and culture. Seldom, if ever, are the pathologies of one culture resolved by adopting the stories of another. Fifty or so thousand of years of separate cultural development have resulted in profound differences between Indigenous and settler ways of seeing the land and our place in it. There is much that settlers can learn from Indigenous people and culture along the way, but settlers from very different lands and climates cannot learn to belong here by naively trying to adopt an Indigenous worldview.

Instead, the view taken in this book is that, as the American Jungian psychologist James Hillman wrote, “The wound and the eye are one and the same.”<sup>29</sup> Like every dream, every myth contains the seeds of its own healing. If the heroic heritage of settler Australia is the problem, then understanding it better, entering into its shadow with open eyes, is also the solution.

Some popular (or infamous) narratives supposedly set in the outback have been left out or given short shrift because they have nothing much to say in this context or are downright fraudulent. Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* escapes into pseudo-Aboriginal mysticism just when it gets interesting, with the drovers and cattle needing to cross the fearsome Kuramon Desert in order to reach Darwin. Three days later, they are almost dead when Luhrmann pulls out a favourite Australian *deus ex machina*, with the old Aboriginal clever man “King George” (David Gulpilil) conjuring up water and fish out of the dry lake bed. The next we see of the party is when the drovers and their cattle shake the crockery as they trundle, hair and makeup intact, down the main street of wartime Darwin.

Another overlooked narrative is *Mutant Message Down Under*, a New Age fable written by retired Missouri nurse Marlo Morgan and first published in 1990. It originally purported to be a true account of her journey across Australia in the company of an Aboriginal tribe with the unlikely name of the Real People. Although it was eventually exposed as a hoax, it was a bestseller in the United States. Not in Australia, though, where it comprehensively failed the bullshit test.<sup>30</sup> While Morgan’s book tapped into the mystical and redemptive needs and fantasies of New Age Americans, it says nothing about the encounter of settler Australians with the land or Aboriginal peoples, and is a reminder that it is unwise and demeaning to project one’s own spiritual fantasies onto other cultures. On the other hand, she does make one point that is in tune with this book. The outback is, at least potentially, within all of us.

Finally, a word about how this book is laid out. Part 1 begins with the demise in the outback of the conquering explorer-hero of European culture, and then identifies a number of other mythic figures who have emerged from his corpse. At the end of each chapter in Part 1 is a selection of quotations that explore how elements of their journeys correspond to the three phases of rites of passage—departure, initiation and return—as well as their legacies. The one exception to this format is Chapter 6. It was written from within the mythic theme of metamorphosis rather than rites of passage, so there are no corresponding pages of quotations. Part 2 explores some themes emerging out of the narratives discussed in Part 1 as they relate to the central idea of outback journeys as rites of passage. The book ends by considering whether the outback is disappearing, either as a “real” place of isolation and testing, or from the consciousness of coastal Australians.

## **PART ONE: TRAVELLERS**



# 1. THE EXPLORER-HERO

If there has ever been any metaphysical understanding found within the continent it has consistently been one of devolution, loss and exasperation. The great, empty continent seems to have persevered in our minds to spite any vision of bountifulness and hope. The idea of a fall, of immense deserts, fulfilling a perverse and endless despair continually comes forth in our traditions as the European understanding of what the land is. This earth disappoints and rejects any bright and pastoral world.

—James Bardon<sup>31</sup>

From Achilles and Odysseus to Churchill and Mandela, the West has long worshipped figures who embody the heroic impulse, as Tennyson put it, “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.”<sup>32</sup> While other cultures tell myths of god-men whose journeys and exploits helped to fashion the world we know today, nowhere have they achieved the same prominence or longevity as in Greece and the West. Nowhere else does literature—saga, epic, tragedy, the novel, and biography—revolve to the same extent around the figure of an individual, usually male and with superhuman qualities, who is on a quest of some kind. It also helps if the hero’s story contains an object longed for and then possessed, an enemy worthy of destroying, a reward after all his trials and failures, and the quasi-immortality of a name engraved in stone.

The hero’s quest usually involves a journey. Tennyson wrote of Ulysses that he was “always roaming with a hungry heart.” Alexander the Great, it is said, would sit outside his tent or on the bank of a river and gaze at the horizon. “Seized by *pothos*”—by a longing for the unattainable—he would be propelled forward into new territory and conquests.<sup>33</sup> Western civilisation can be read as an ongoing story of *pothos*: of a longing to know what lies over the horizon, as if this would bring us comfort and rest. But there is always another horizon, of course, so sooner or later it will always be time to move on.

In colonising the world, Europe exported its heroic worldview along with guns, beads and syphilis. When the nineteenth century explorers were preparing to set out for the interior of Australia, they often wrote and spoke of their plans in grand, heroic terms. They would be discoverers of great rivers and rich farming land, conquerors of dumb nature, vanguards



of a new society, victors over both ignoble savages and aspirants from other imperial powers.

Whether swift or protracted, the demise of these fantasies was inevitable as the inland explorers were forced by the changing course of rivers, impassable salt lakes, dwindling supplies, hostile natives or the water—as often too much as too little of it—to turn for home before reaching their goals. Where they did not die en route, they returned not as conquering heroes but as stoic survivors, ragged and beaten but hanging on to life thanks to the sacrifice of their animals, the change of seasons or the aid given by Aborigines along the way.

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It wasn't just the usual suspects among nineteenth century explorers—Leichhardt's entire party in 1848, most of Kennedy's in the same year, and Burke and Wills in 1861—or the gold-addled scheister Lewis Lasseter in the early twentieth, who succumbed to heat, thirst, malnutrition or hostile Aborigines. Many more died along the way.

The "B team" roll call begins in 1832, when two men in a support party to Thomas Mitchell's first expedition to north-west New South Wales in search of the rumoured Kindur River were killed by Aborigines. Botanist Richard Cunningham accompanied Mitchell on his 1835 expedition but disappeared near the Bogan River on 17 April while searching for new plant specimens and was apparently later killed by Aborigines. John Baxter, the overseer on Eyre's trek across the Nullarbor in 1841, was shot by Aborigines in the party while he slept. John Horrocks was shot in the head by his own camel, north of Adelaide in 1845, when it kicked his rifle and set it off, firing a bullet through his right hand and mouth. Charles Sturt's second in command, James Poole, died of scurvy while they were marooned at Depot Glen (near modern Tibooburra) for six months in 1845. The naturalist John Gilbert was speared by Aborigines at night on Leichhardt's first successful expedition from the Darling Downs to Port Essington, also in 1845 (a big year for death in the outback). The sick John Gray was strapped to his camel as he slowly succumbed on Burke and Wills' trudge south from the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1861, his chances of survival not aided by the savage beating he received from Burke for stealing some watery porridge three weeks earlier. And finally there was my ancestor Charlie Stansmore, shot by his own rifle near the end of David Carnegie's expedition in the north-west of Western Australia in 1896.

Others returned close to death. Charles Sturt had become afflicted by scurvy, his skin turned black and his muscles rigid, before being almost restored to health by eating bush tucker on his party's return journey from Depot Glen to Adelaide in 1846. After successfully crossing the continent in 1862, the nearly blind and scurvy-afflicted John McDouall Stuart had to be strapped to his horse by his men in order to make it back alive to Adelaide. John King, the sole survivor of the Burke and Wills expedition, was found "wasted as a shadow" after three months surviving around Cooper Creek with the help of the local Aboriginal people, and had to be "rubbed down with brandy inside and out" after each river crossing on his way back to Melbourne to keep him alive.

Many animals also perished along the way. Bullocks and sheep were herded painfully slowly through forests and bogs and across rivers and deserts, sooner or later to be slaughtered for meat if starvation or dehydration didn't get them first. Likewise the horses and camels which provided transport for men and supplies across some of the most inhospitable country on earth. Horses and dogs died of exhaustion, hunger or thirst or were shot for meat after providing reliable and uncomplaining companionship for their masters for months or years, their flesh dried into leather-tough jerkies or boiled over campfires in pots. Unwitting crows, wallabies and snakes were shot or caught and eaten, often half raw and occasionally while still alive, although some had their revenge by inflicting dysentery on their killers. Native animals and insects were caught and caged or killed for scientific purposes—late in his 1884-6 expedition journal Sturt mentions two *Dipus* and five *Jerboas*, both hopping desert rodents<sup>34</sup>—but few made it back alive, if at all.

The classic age of inland exploration probably ended with geologist JW Gregory's trek around Lake Eyre in the summer of 1901-02. It was the last to proceed with animal rather than mechanical horsepower (or in this case, camelpower) and without the aid of radio communications. Gregory's account of traversing this arid landscape gave rise to the term the "dead heart", although he held out hope that it might be brought to life by "restoring to the surface the waters, that now lie useless underground."<sup>35</sup>

The term "dead heart" stuck and entered the vernacular, becoming synonymous with coastal Australians' discomfort with the outback. It lent itself to the title of Nick Parsons' 1996 film of unresolved intercultural conflict set in an Aboriginal community in central Australia. Here, the dead heart refers not only to geographic centre of the continent but to hearts closed to new experiences and other cultures and especially to one's own truth.

Since Gregory's time, no explorers but numerous "ordinary" people have died in the outback while travelling. Only a few of them have become household names. The infant Azaria Chamberlain is by far the most famous. Her death was the subject of no less than four coronial inquests; a trial that resulted in murder convictions for her parents; unsuccessful appeals to the Federal and High courts; a royal commission that resulted in the quashing of those convictions in 1987; and in 1992 an *ex gratia* payment of \$1.3 million in compensation from the Northern Territory government to the parents. Yet it was not until 2012 that Azaria was officially found to have died "as the result of being attacked and taken by a dingo."<sup>36</sup> In the meantime her case had become the subject of numerous books, a feature film starring Meryl Streep and Sam Neill, a miniseries, even an opera by Moya Henderson and a concept album by rock band The Paradise Motel called *Australian Ghost Story*. And the cry, "A dingo stole my baby!" had become an American as well as Australian pop cultural idiom.

English tourist Peter Falconio was murdered by Bradley John Murdoch after being abducted on the Stuart Highway in 2001. His body, too, remains unbound, and his death sparked another prolonged round of media speculation, this time about the possible involvement of his girlfriend, Joanne Lees. The speculation was mostly in the British media, Australians being under no illusions about the potential for travellers to be ambushed by a psychopath in a ute on an empty road.

Rod Ansell, the inspiration behind the Mick "Crocodile" Dundee of cinematic fame, became a reluctant celebrity after his fifty-six day survival ordeal in crocodile country in 1977. Later he became a drug addict and suffered mental illness and was shot dead after ambushing police in the Northern Territory in 1999. This time the only mystery was how he went so far off the rails as to bear no resemblance to the wholesome hero of the film franchise.

The rest are known to us only fleetingly, via news reports of people—often tourists, sometimes station workers or local Indigenous people in old cars—who die, usually of dehydration and heat exhaustion, after getting lost or their car breaking down in the middle of nowhere. In 2013, 25 year old station worker Mauritz "Mo" Pieterse died from dehydration on a nature reserve on the northern edge of the Simpson Desert. His 4WD got bogged while he was inspecting a bore. Lacking water or other supplies, he and a co-worker broke the first rule of outback breakdowns (stay with your vehicle) and tried to walk the sixteen kilometres back to the homestead. Only the other man made it back alive over the thirty or so high, soft sand dunes that lay between their vehicle and safety.

These names are few compared to the millions of other Australians who have died in wars or car crashes or in their own beds over the past two centuries. Yet the outback deaths are remembered in history, the arts and the mass media out of all proportion to their numbers. They have been not only remembered and memorialised, investigated and debated, but also heroised and demonised, while becoming the subject of narratives from dinner table gossip and news grabs through to inquests and trials, novelised reportage and feature films.

Nowhere is this clearer than in relation to the black farce of the Burke and Wills expedition of 1860-61. There were no less than four relief expeditions from Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane. All returned without the loss of a single life. Do we remember the names even of their leaders? But the dead explorers quickly became the subject of collective grief, fascination, legend, myth, and finally cliché and satire. The process began with Burke and Wills' funeral procession drawing a crowd of 40,000 and the glass-topped coffins bearing their incomplete skeletons being viewed by 100,000 Melburnians out of a population at the time of only 125,000. As Alan Moorehead observes,

Without the tragedy on the Cooper they would have remained rather minor figures, but with it they were lifted to another and higher plane, one might even say a state of grace. And that perhaps was more important for them than the conquest of the ghastly blank.<sup>37</sup>

From the 1860s to the present day, the mythologising of Burke and Wills has continued, thanks most recently to Sarah Murgatroyd's fine work of historical journalism, *The Dig Tree*. The tree itself, which is on the banks of muddy Oonabrinta Creek, down a stony track just across the Queensland-South Australia border near Innamincka, survives despite being the object of pilgrimage for thousands of outback travellers every year.

Contemporary Australians have come to know the expedition best through Sidney Nolan's Burke and Wills paintings. The paintings executed between 1948 and 1984, which progressed from historical enactment through metaphysical reflection to postmodern deconstruction, reflect the nation's as well as Nolan's relationship to their subject. In 1985 there was also a feature film starring Nigel Havers and Jack Thompson.<sup>38</sup> That year also saw the release of a parody, *Wills and Burke*, starring Garry MacDonald and Kim Gynnell. The fascination continued in muted form in 2006 with a low budget film being released under the title of *Burke and Wills*. This was presumably meant in a postmodern, ironic sense, since its two main characters—Burke, a fragile, troubled soul; and Wills, a naive,

talkative dreamer—do nothing more adventurous than flirt with a bromance while sharing a house in inner city Sydney.

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The legacy of disappointment may be even stronger than that of death. This theme probably began with Thomas Mitchell's first expedition in 1831-32. Mitchell explored the land between the Gwydir and Namoi rivers for the mythical Kunder River, the existence of which had been asserted by an escaped convict who had lived for years with Aborigines before being recaptured. Mitchell failed to find the Kunder and was forced to return to Sydney when Aborigines killed two of his men and plundered his stores. He set out twice more, in 1835 and 1836. Burdened by too many bullocks and stores, he moved too slowly to progress westward beyond the Darling River. His consolation was to "discover" (for Europeans at least) the relatively fertile and well-watered area of western Victoria he called Australia Felix, although even there he was not actually the first settler to visit or settle.<sup>39</sup>

Edward John Eyre was the first European explorer to see the deserts. He tried to push north from Adelaide in 1839 but was beaten by the "dry and glazed bed" of Lake Torrens. He, too, tried again in 1840 to pursue "the discovery of the interior of Australia" but was beaten in his trek north by Lake Eyre South to the north and Mount Hopeless to the east, as well as by Lake Torrens again. So he turned south and then pushed west, eventually struggling into Albany with his Aboriginal guide Wylie. Aside from being remembered for the pathos of the overseer Baxter's murder and his and Wylie's terrible trek west thereafter, Eyre's journey confirmed the unrelentingly barren nature of the landscape between the colonial towns of Adelaide and Perth.

Charles Sturt, the first European to see and name the Darling and Murray rivers, was also the most famous exponent of the fantasy of an inland sea. He persisted in this belief until his third and final expedition in 1844-45, on which he had a team of bullocks drag a whaling boat a thousand kilometres north from Adelaide before abandoning it at Depot Glen. Sturt's party was trapped at this little waterhole for six months until rain released them to push further north into the Simpson Desert. But they were forced to return to Adelaide without having discovered an inland sea. Sturt's non-discovery, said the *Sydney Morning Herald* at the time, "struck daggers into our Australian hearts."<sup>40</sup>

After failing on no less than four previous expeditions, John McDouall Stuart succeeded in crossing the continent from south to north and

returning alive (just) to Adelaide in 1862. His success was tempered by confirmation that not only was there no inland sea, there were not even any substantial or permanent rivers for over two and a half thousand kilometres north of Adelaide. As he stated baldly on climbing Central Mount Stuart, “We can see no water from the top.”<sup>41</sup>

For their part, after nearly six months of trudging through boggy bush and dry desert, Burke and Wills came within miles of the shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, becoming the first Europeans to cross the continent, only to be thwarted by impenetrable mangrove swamps. They were denied, as Moorehead puts it, “their moment of triumph before turning back to that fateful depot on the Cooper.”<sup>42</sup>

These expeditions succeeded in shrinking the “hideous blank” that dominated the map of Australia in the early nineteenth century, but at the expense of dashing the hopes of European colonists for large inland rivers or an inland sea and fertile land. By the 1860s, the interior of Australia had established itself in the European imagination of Australia as a place of despair, defeat and death.

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Heroic failures became a much greater part of the emerging Australian story than successful journeys of exploration. This led to the emergence of an ethos that historian Michael Cathcart calls “*necronationalism*—a nationalism based on death.”<sup>43</sup> In his view, the deaths of Leichhardt and Burke and Wills in particular led to their journeys and lives soon attaining the status of myth and sanctification. By the mid-1870s, “this necronationalism was a pervasive sentiment in Australia, especially in artistic circles.”<sup>44</sup>

Although Cathcart observes examples of this sentiment even in the late twentieth century, he also contends that the “nationalism of defeat” was countered by “a new spirit of optimism” that stirred in the late nineteenth century. On the surface, the cult of necronationalism started to recede from the 1880s, when the first artesian bores were drilled in Victoria and New South Wales, opening up huge areas of previously unreliable land to sheep and cattle grazing. And while the great gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s were in well-watered areas relatively close to Sydney and Melbourne, in the same decade the first large mine in the desert opened at Broken Hill, followed in the 1890s by another gold rush in Kalgoorlie.

The expansion of grazing and mining, followed by tourism from the 1950s and the Aboriginal art movement from the 1970s, all eroded the idea of the outback as a place of disappointment and death. Still,