WOMEN OF THE OUTBACK:
INSPIRING TRUE STORIES OF
TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH

Sue Williams (2008)
Camberwell, Vic: Michael Joseph ISBN 978-0-718104-94-8 pp xi 288 $32.95 RRP paperback

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Henry Lawson’s *The drover’s wife*, an instant success when published in 1892, presents a story often told when Australians give an account of themselves – the plain but compelling narrative of the stoic Australian woman, who contends with rural hardship and achieves transcendence over the mundane. Painters such as Russell Drysdale, poets such as Banjo Patterson and modernist writers such as Patrick White, have all contributed to this artistic tradition. Less elevated, and even more numerous, are the scores of magazine articles, newspaper features and tourist souvenirs that fasten onto the Australian rural woman and her ideal qualities.

Sue Williams’ *Women of the outback* continues the tradition of representations of women and the bush. Written in an accessible style and aimed at a general readership, it is a worthy study of rural women. Its series of life studies provides valuable documentation and reveals the persistence and remodelling of rural imagery in contemporary Australia.

Williams has interviewed 14 women active in outback life and offers descriptive accounts of their lives. All leaders in different fields, the women demonstrate that tourism, as much as agriculture, is now a rural industry. Entertainment is also important, and revealing accounts are given about the country singer Sara Storer and the poet and stand-up comic Sandy Thorne. Two Indigenous women – game hunter and artist Mitjili Gibson Napanangka and tourist guide Mandy Muir – share their experiences. There are no interviews with the women involved in mining.

A fascinating feature of this text is that it shows how rural women themselves interact with the myths and stereotypes of the bush. In several instances, women are able to relate the ideals of the outback to create songs, writings, paintings and rural heritage sites. Not merely passive objects idealised by the culture, these rural women know both the reality and the myth, and are able to infuse one with the other.

Molly Clark, who rebuilt a 1920s farm house, Old Andado, and made it an attraction for tourists, commented wryly on the reasons she became well known: ‘Most of that fuss is because you’re alone, and people can’t get over the fact that a woman can be out there on her own’ (p. 40). Clark wished to have women’s lives better known, and was the prime organiser in the creation of the National Pioneer Women’s Hall of Fame, a museum which preserves women’s contribution to nation building.

Several stories are tragic. Some of the women have been severely injured. Their responses are always stoic. Referring to an accident that tore off her right arm and left her left arm without function, Gail Shann says ‘there’ve never been many tears from me’ (p. 13). Maree Stockman, of her fingers being cut off by a harvester, says ‘It was my own silly fault... The worst thing was, I felt I’d failed my family’ (p. 113). Alice Greenup says a fall from a horse that caused liver and brain damage, leaving her with problems with face recognition, brought her closer to her husband (p. 202).

Several of the women lost husbands and sons in aircraft and car accidents; one had a father who died of cancer as a result of working at the Maralinga nuclear test sites. The losses are counted, but then set aside as the work of fate. Nell Brook, whose son died in a helicopter accident, says ‘The moment Deon died, the life we knew died as well... But at the same time, I think it finetunes your capacity to experience human emotion. It also gives you the resolve to recognise and experience joy’ (p. 65). Lynnie Plate, whose son died in a car accident, says ‘You’re never the same; nothing’s ever the same’ (p. 159). Communities
always rally to support families, and Lynnie Plate’s losses linked her to the Indigenous community: ‘The local Aboriginals knew death intimately, since it’s such a common visitor among their people, so they helped comfort Lynnie’ (p. 159). This melancholy statement is one of the few hints of a note of protest. Is there not too much death? Read in context, the stories suggest that there are few avenues for rural women to protest against hardship.

*RESOLVING INDIGENOUS DISPUTES: LAND CONFLICT AND BEYOND*

Behrendt, L. and Kelly, L. (2008)

Annandale, NSW: The Federation Press ISBN 978-1-862877-07-8, pp. 150 $39.95 RRP paperback

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This book is an important and helpful contribution to both the literature on Aboriginal law and policy, and that on alternative dispute resolution (ADR). Aimed at the intersection of these diverse areas of social regulation, and proposing a strategy for the transformation of native title land disputes, the book, despite its brevity, has an ambitious, activist project that its authors are well equipped to develop.

Focussing on native title law, the book argues that the present legal regime has failed Aboriginal people and seeks to show how this might be put right. The dominant theme is the critical importance of land to Aboriginal identity, the way that the concept of country has unique cultural, social, physical and historical significance within Aboriginal lore, culture, sovereignty and nationhood. The forced and often violent dispossession of Aboriginal people from country is at the core of Aboriginal trauma, of contemporary social dislocation and alienation. The authors argue that the process of native title dispute resolution should be, but in its current form is not, a process for the restoration of human dignity and esteem to Aboriginal culture and society. The legal process requires a radical reappraisal; it has to be founded upon recognition of Aboriginal cultural values, starting with Aboriginal nationhood and authority.

The book identifies mediation as the core mechanism the law employs to deal with native title land disputes. Although mediation is posited as an ADR system, which enables parties to complex litigation to have genuine participation in the resolution of disputes, the authors argue that certain aspects of the practice of mediation generally, and specifically with respect to native title disputes, impede genuine Aboriginal participation. This leads to disempowerment, to alienation from and disillusionment with the whole legal process. The authors explore how the mediation process should be reformed, arguing for a ‘space for re-empowerment’ (p. 83) to ensure that litigation outcomes through mediation reflect the rights and interests of Aboriginal people.

A series of chapters on current native title law and practice, and on Aboriginal anthropology, establish the background for the argument. Crucial to the current legal regime are the 1992 Mabo judgement, the development of native title legislation, and the series of disappointing legal decisions and political manoeuvrings that progressively eroded the hopes raised by the landmark High Court cases. The authors argue that what has evolved is a complex area of law that re-ects positivist, formalist legal approaches, which marginalise the traditional, tribal and informal approaches to dispute resolution that epitomise Aboriginal culture and social regulation. This in turn has formalised a system of dispute regulation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples as competing claimants to land (‘inter-cultural’ disputes), but also a signifi cant and complex level of disputation between Aboriginal people themselves and their representative agencies and groups (‘intra-cultural’ dispute). The authors seek to develop new models for the resolution of such disputes and present illuminating case studies to highlight the complex issues pertaining particularly to intra-cultural disputes.
Much of the contemporary literature on conflict resolution, especially that part of it concerned with violent, internal political conflict and post-conflict restoration, emphasises the need for ‘bottom-up’ solutions to conflicts that have torn away the fabric of communities. Reflecting the values of communities and peoples who are subjected to violence, locally initiated, developed and owned processes of community restoration and justice are better placed to articulate processes and symbols of restoration, reparation, reconciliation and healing that will work for such communities than are outsiders’ ‘solutions’, which are invariably imposed from ‘above’.

Although this book focuses on domestic conflict resolution, contemporary post-conflict analysis thought underpins the rationale for its use of concepts of inter- and intra-cultural dispute resolution. And given the historical context of oppression, atrocity and violence that the authors contend frames Aboriginal displacement from land, the parallels between these models and that which informs the broader literature has strong resonance. The authors reject the current system of land dispute resolution as an imposed construct that reinforces post-colonial domination. This is a thesis, articulated in Aboriginal reconciliation literature, which is not explored in this book (see, for example, Motha cited in Veitch, 2007; and Short, 2008). It is used, however, as a rationale for developing alternative models of dispute resolution that are centred on healing – a critical concept in the restoration and reunification of peoples and communities traumatised by conflict. The argument is that Aboriginals must have ownership of the mediation process and a facilitative role in it and this should be guided and informed by their values, customs and traditions.

The concept of healing is an important element of the practice and literature on reconciliation. Reconciliation concerns the coming together of conflicting parties; in the Australian Aboriginal context, it is about the healing of divisions between Aboriginals and other Australians and this is facilitated through, among other things, forgiveness. This book, however, is not about reconciliation or forgiveness. Neither is mentioned in the text. The emphasis is on Aboriginal empowerment, specifically in native title litigation, and this is proposed as a source for healing Aboriginal trauma and ultimately for facilitating Aboriginal sovereignty and nationhood.

Yet the native title process is a system of law and is founded on the rule of law, specifically the propriety of resolving complex legal and social disputes equitably according to law. It is not reconciliation, yet it is, or was intended to be, a step in that direction. The authors recognise, and on several occasions validate, the importance of native title. This suggests that they would do well to consider how their models of dispute resolution, and specifically the rationales on which they are based, sit within the broader dynamic of Australian reconciliation. If some form of native title law is important, the authors need to address whether and how this enhances the rule of law, as well as broader Australian society, not merely one section of it, albeit a critically significant section.

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MAKING SENSE OF PLACE: 
EXPLORING CONCEPTS AND 
EXPRESSIONS OF PLACE THROUGH 
DIFFERENT SENSES AND LENSES

Vanclay, F., Higgins, M. and Blackshaw, A. (Éds) (2008)
Canberra, ACT: National Museum of Australia Press ISBN 978-1-87694-451-3, pp. 340 $29.95 RRP paperback

This book seems to be more about sentiment and place than about the senses and place. Anthropological studies record the way that an Indigenous sense of place is informed by a truly multi-sensory or kinaesthetic knowing. These studies may privilege one sense (often hearing) but commonly offer deep multi-sensory descriptions of immersion in nature. Only one paper in this collection refers to kinaesthetic knowing and even there the concept is not developed. More commonly, the collection privileges sight and thus reflects the dominant cultural assumption that sight is lord among the senses. This does not have to be a problem; the book was not compiled to address Indigenous notions of place. It does, however, draw attention to differences between Indigenous and settler ways of being and knowing in place.

If one lives a life without pastoral or agricultural pursuits, if one moves from place to place according to the seasonal variability of food supplies, one becomes immersed in place in a multi-faceted way that requires the development of acute sensibilities to all aspects of nature around. To know particular smells, colours, sounds, textures, tastes – and much more – becomes a matter of survival. The bonds of affection or of sentiment about place are likely to run as deep as this knowledge of place and to be entwined with this practical/economic knowing. Spiritual lore developed over millennia in relation to place and nature makes the connection deeper still. This sort of association with place is likely to have been part of daily life for all our ancestors but is less likely for modern humans, whether ‘on the land’ or urban.

For these sorts of reasons, I feel that Jane Mulcock and David Trigger greatly over-state their case for labelling settler sensibilities and sentiments in Australia as a new form of Indigenous knowledge. Although both groups, Indigenous and settler, may experience deep ties of affection and all humans are tied to the land by necessity, it is important to recognise, especially in these times of dire threat to nature, that Indigenous and settler notions of ownership are diametrically opposed. One is based on private property, on ideas of ownership of land, the other on ideas that people belong to the land. The last paper in this collection, by Jeff Malpas, deals with concepts of ownership and relationship well:

When we fail to understand the real nature of our connection to place, and refuse to understand that connection other than in terms of ownership and control, then not only have we misunderstood ourselves, but we have also lost any real sense of place as such. To have a sense of place is not to own, but rather to be owned by the places we inhabit; it is to own up to the complexity and mutuality of both place and human being. (p. 331)

Readers of Rural Society are likely to have had personal experience bringing them to consider differences in both types of ownership. Some of the issues at stake are raised by Merrill Findlay’s moving, nuanced attempt to come to grips with how her ancestors, themselves dispossessed of their land in the British Isles, dispossessed the Australians they found here when they came to this land, and with how the task of her generation is to bring the land back to health.

Phil Cormack, Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid describe a project that links primary school teaching and the Murray Darling Basin Commission and which engages primary children in artistic representations of their own places. A new stage of this program aims to go beyond observation and celebration towards critical engagement with the serious challenges faced by this crucial Australian watershed.

Greg Lehman, in evoking how ‘hills and mountains are manifestations of creation beings – creatures from ancient stories, each with lessons to teach about the right way to live with the land and its people’ (p. 107), shows us another way that Indigenous relationships to place differ from settler ways.

Colin Goodrich and Kaylene Sampson, on the west coast of New Zealand, discuss the importance of community. Through a very concrete example of how locals chose place/community over jobs, they show, as do many other contributors to the collection, that place is about culture.
Of particular interest to readers who want a forum to voice/address their own problems is the very stimulating paper by Frank Vanclay, Jo Wills and Ruth Lane that discusses communities coming together and articulating environmental problems through museum outreach projects: the ‘Pass the Salt’ project, for example, allowed the documentation of change and destruction of places and dwellings due to increased salinity.

Gordon Waitt and Robert Figueroa’s paper on Uluru crystallises how much place is about specific cultural interpretations. In showing us differences between settler and Indigenous attitudes, it reveals two different – and incompatible – cultures of Uluru.

Edward Relph seriously considers the problems of global social and environmental challenges, suggesting that we find ways to mitigate their effects in particular places. Although this may be a necessity, I hope that readers will be more inclined to heed the many voices in this collection that point us towards avoiding some of these problems by taking better care of our own places.

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**Music and love: Music in the lives of Italian Australians in Griffith, New South Wales**

Bannister, R. (2007)

Melbourne: Italian Australian Institute, La Trobe University
ISBN 9-780977-500956, pp. 304 $25.00 paperback

Roland Bannister, educationalist and music teacher has had an interest in Italy and Italians for many years and has translated this interest into an exploration of the life experiences and activities of musicians (some born in Italy and some in Australia) from various generations living in Griffith.

The book’s 18 chapters plus epilogue and appendix span such subjects as the songs and music these people perform or used to perform, their music classes at school in Australia, their community gatherings, and music in family, in church at weddings and community gatherings. It contains much that pertains to the family life of various individuals and a number of evocative historical photographs. Bannister has had the collaboration of Tony Comin (one-time inhabitant of Griffith and formerly professor of Italian at Flinders University) in transcribing and translating some of the songs, which form part of the musicians’ repertoire.

The many who have collaborated in providing oral testimony, or who are familiar with Griffith, will undoubtedly appreciate Bannister’s work. However, this is essentially a work for local consumption, for those who wish to read the transcripts of life accounts by friends and relations, with their linguistic flaws and all. As a study, it is too long and rambling and more like a database of materials from which a more focussed and succinct article could be drawn. Direction, analysis and conclusions have fallen by the wayside. None of the transcribed songs have been linked to their origins, whether in terms of music or society. Nor do we learn what training the various musicians from Italy may have had. What their children, who learnt music at school in Australia, have to say is not specific to an Italian experience and could have been said by children of any origin.

Bannister does offer an evocation of life as it was lived by immigrants in a provincial town and within certain limits this could be said to be successful. Although he is generously ‘drawn to admiration for Italians’ determination to learn our ways’, his Italian, as he confesses, is not sufficient to have enabled him to interview the older migrants satisfactorily. The title, with its stereotypical assumptions about Italy, is revealing: The Italy of romantic love glorified in many an American film lives on. But there is room for greater understanding of a more complex reality.
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Volume 3 Issue 3 – 2009
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Introduction: Illuminating everyday realities: the significance of video methods for social science and health research – Rowena Forsyth, Katherine E Carroll, Paul Reitano
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Postscript: The significance of video research methodology for health and social science – Alexandra Juhasz, Christian Heath, Rick Iedema

Volume 3 Issue 1 – 2009
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Introduction: Ten points about mixed methods research to be considered by the novice researcher – Kathleen MT Collins, Alicia O’Cathain
Prologue: Mixed methods for novice researchers: Reflections and themes – Julia Brannen
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Conclusion: Lessons learned for teaching mixed research: A framework for novice researchers – Anthony J Onwuegbuzie, Nancy L Leech
Book Reviews
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– Reviewed by Phil Francis Carspecken

Volume 2 Issue 2 – 2008
Q-Squared in Policy: The Use of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods of Poverty Analysis in Decision-Making
Editorial: Introduction to Q-Squared in Policy – Paul Shaffer, Ravi Kanbur, Thang Nguyen, Ellen Borlet-Doku Ayestey
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Volume 2 Issue 1 – 2008
General Issue with Section: Computer Assisted Multiple and Blended Research
Methodological Congruence in Complex and Collaborative Mixed Method Projects – Wilfreda E Thurston, Leslie Cove, Lynn M Meadows
Blending Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses in Observing Interaction: Misunderstandings, applications and proposals – Augusto Gnisci, Roger Bakeman, Vicenç Quera
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