

**MARK
McKENNA**

RETURN TO

**A killing
A hidden history
A story that goes
to the heart of
the nation**

ULURU

‘The most powerful
narrative I have read of
frontier injustice and
its resonance in our
lives today’
—**Marcia Langton**

‘A spellbinding story
of death and
resurrection that is
Australian to its core’
—**James Boyce**

SAMPLE
TEXT

PART ONE

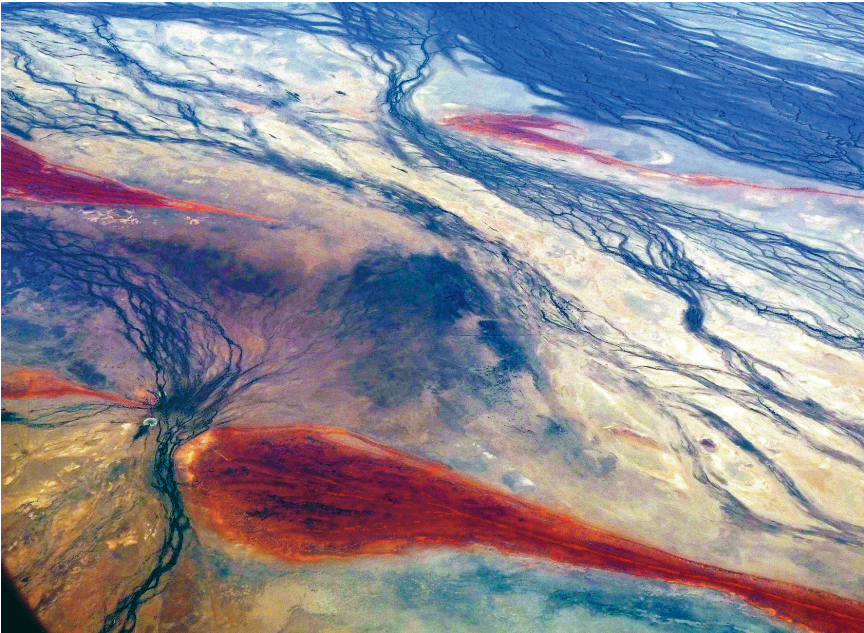
Looking for the Centre

Among the scientific world, there has been a great desire to obtain a knowledge of the central portion of New Holland ... to lift off the curtain on this hitherto impenetrable country.

Daniel George Brock, *To the Desert with Sturt*, 1844¹

A traveller may now describe Central Australia as a heart-breaking wilderness.

J.W. Gregory, *The Dead Heart of Australia*, 1906²



Central Australia from the air, 2012.

When we imagine Australia whole, we see it from above. Mapped. A meandering line that encompasses eight million square kilometres of the earth's landmass, creating a shape and form so familiar it needs no explanation. On a satellite image, the internal border lines we've drawn across the surface of the world's only island continent dissolve. The populous edges thicken and shimmer. The centre dominates. Reaching out. Touching everything. An ocean unto itself.

From the air it appears infinite. A country 'beyond the edge' – unfathomable, humbling and eternal – a country for disappearing into.³ The plains and hills stretch all the way to the horizon, beating in a blinding haze of ochre and red. Even the perpetual groundswell of heat fails to dim the echo of the vast inland sea that once covered central Australia more than 150 million years ago. The forces that sculpted the country have left their ineffaceable mark. Every gibber plain and desert in the arid heartland is haunted by the memory of salt water.

Climbing 'the summit of a sandy undulation' in 1844, the explorer Charles Sturt gazed out on 'interminable' ridges of sand dunes that extended 'northwards in parallel lines beyond [his] range of vision'. They appeared to him 'like the waves of the sea'. In the late 1940s, flying over the landscapes of central Australia and looking down on the same country that Sturt surveyed

100 years earlier, the artist Sidney Nolan saw the ‘earth with a layer peeled off’, ‘a hard, strong country with a power almost tangible’, drenched in a ‘transparent and impenetrable light’. For Nolan too, the resounding presence of the ocean was undeniable. Struck by the ‘mathematical’ and ‘almost theological’ beauty of the parallel dunes, their ‘subtle relations intertwining as they [stretched] over the land’, the heart of the continent – ‘as old as Genesis’ – was revealed to him. Most of it, he recalled years later, ‘looks like the bed of the sea and most of it was’. Like the sedimentary veins of colour redolent of a more fertile past that course through the rocks and mountains, the traces of water’s movement millions of years ago throughout central Australia have given rise to oceanic metaphors of absence and longing.⁴

Perspective is everything. The centre of Australia was once imagined by Europeans from the deck of a ship. In 1770, when James Cook sketched his first maps of the continent as he sailed up the east coast, he sprinkled mountains like confetti onto the blank spaces of the interior, as if they might crown verdant valleys and grasslands. For the countless Europeans who followed in Cook’s wake, the coast quickly became the centre of ‘civilisation’ while the vast unexplored lands of the country’s interior remained an enigma that would one day have to be breached if the country was ever to be truly known.

By the mid-nineteenth century, piercing the veiled centre was seen as the last step in claiming the continent. To find the centre was to confront the metaphysical dilemma of being a white man in an Aboriginal country. As the explorers set out on their quest, they wrote their awe, terror and incomprehension onto the country they encountered – a godless landscape of ‘wretched bareness’ where there were ‘no Sundays’.⁵ Biblical images of trial and

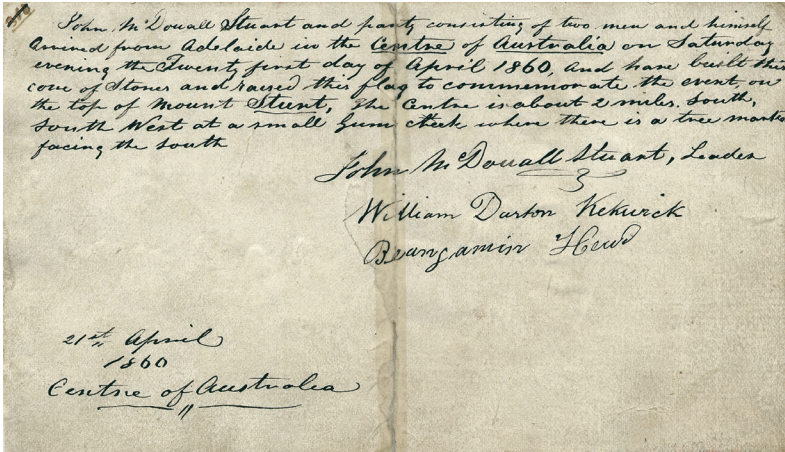
suffering abounded. In 1844, Sturt, unnerved by the 'solemn stillness' and 'monotonous wilderness', felt himself 'the last of creation amid the desolation and destruction of the world'. Forced to relinquish his dream of an inland sea and driven back by exhaustion and lack of adequate food and water, Sturt believed that it was his destiny to find the centre of Australia and 'unfold the secrets of the interior'.

For Ernest Giles, travel into an area seemingly more distant and foreign than Europe or North America was an existential journey into 'the centre of silence and solitude'. To reach this almost mythical place, it was necessary to 'walk off the map', to enter a country that could never be conquered by anything other than nature and in which everything was hard-won: movement, physical and spiritual resilience, water, and life itself.⁶

Australia's idea of its centre – its metaphorical depth and scale – is unusual.⁷ Unlike England, where the centre was long a place of fertility and safety from invasion, or the USA, where the belief in manifest destiny drove a constantly expanding frontier, the arid interior of Australia was never fully conquered. Europeans struggled to be little more than interlopers. Obsessed with finding the centre's geographical coordinates, they naively thought they could master it through their measurements alone.

In April 1860, John McDouall Stuart, the obsessive and fiercely independent Scot who had accompanied Charles Sturt in 1844, found what he believed to be the centre of Australia around 124 miles north of present-day Alice Springs. Climbing a nearby hill, from where he could see a 'large plain of gums, mulga and spinifex, with watercourses running through it ... but no water', he 'built a large cone of stones' and attached the British flag to it.⁸ Near the top of his cairn, Stuart, as if marooned on an island, placed a 'small

bottle' which contained his message to any future passers-by. His note remained undisturbed for twelve years before it was discovered by James Ross, one of the workers on the Overland Telegraph Line (completed in 1872), and in 1905 found its way to the State Library of South Australia, where it remains today.⁹



Merely to set eyes on its faded patina is to realise how simple it was for the British to lay claim to Aboriginal Country. Sign here. To confirm possession of hundreds of thousands of square kilometres – an area several times larger than his homeland – Stuart wrote a note of less than 100 words. He dated the letter, noted that the British flag had been raised, stated his name and address, however approximate – ‘about 2 miles South, South West at a small Gum creek’ – and placed his signature at the bottom, together with that of his second-in-command, William Kekwick, and their eighteen-year-old companion, Benjamin Head.

The centre of the continent was finally inscribed with the presence of white Australia. It was a startling dismissal of the rights of Stuart’s fellow British subjects – more than 10,000 Aboriginal

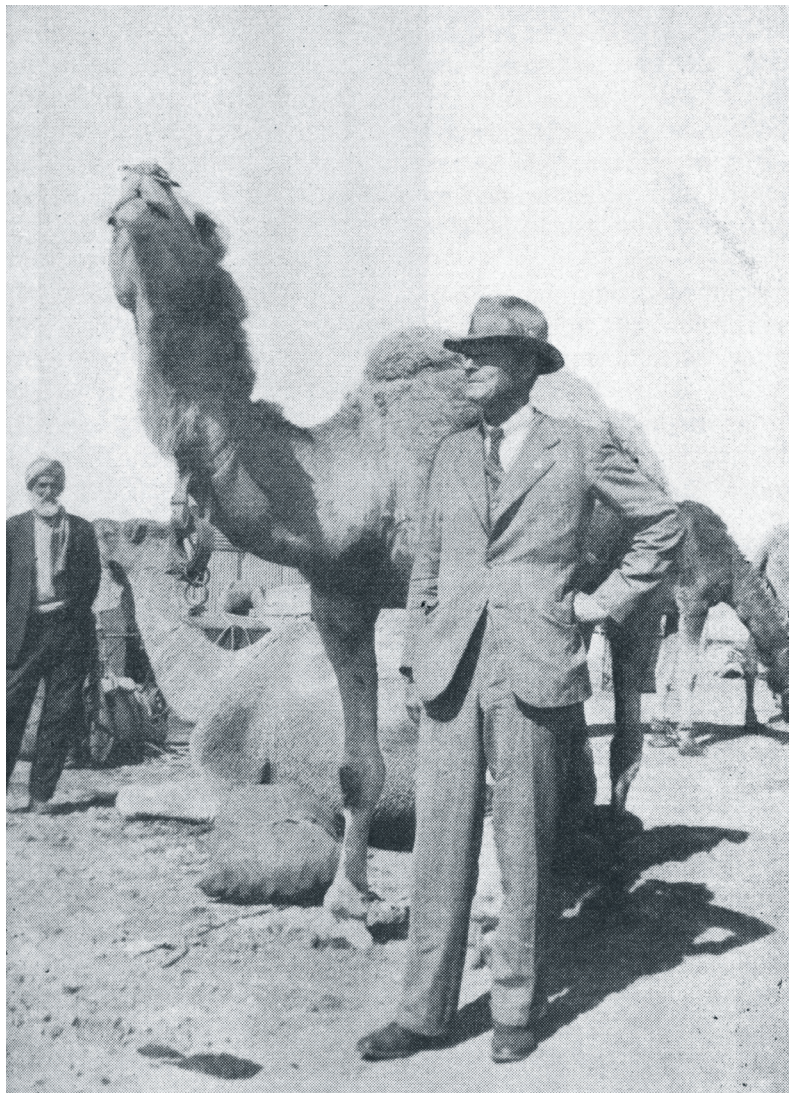
inhabitants of central Australia. As Stuart wrote ominously in his journal, the lonely flag he had planted on the hill was ‘a sign to the natives that the dawn of liberty, civilisation and Christianity [was] about to break upon them’. It happened much as Stuart predicted. Soon to come were pastoralists and their thousands of cattle, missionaries with their gospels and psalms, government officials, educators, judges and law enforcers – like the policeman Bill McKinnon, whose story lies at the heart of this book. The dawn is still breaking over central Australia today.

Looking closely at Stuart’s missive, you can see that the phrase ‘Centre of Australia’ is underlined. This was his goal, after all: to find the centre. It’s only natural that he wanted to emphasise his achievement. But perhaps he was also trying to convince himself that he *had* truly found the centre. As he looked across a waterless plain from the top of the hill that would eventually be named in his honour, he might well have wondered what exactly he had found.

The closer he came to the centre, the more it dissolved. Cavernous silence. Immeasurable landscape. Draining heat. A country that would almost take his life. But he had his measurements. In order to calculate the centre of the continent, he had taken his latitude from the angle of the sun: ‘today I find from my observations of the sun, 111° 00’ 30”, that I am now camped in the centre of Australia. I have marked a tree and planted the British flag there’. It appeared at the time to be a sound calculation. Except that Stuart’s ‘centre’ – commemorated by the erection of a cairn in 1960, which remains a tourist stop on the Stuart Highway today – is no longer considered to be the centre of Australia.

In the 1930s, Australian geologist and explorer Cecil Madigan journeyed by camel through central Australia. Like anyone game enough to venture into what he called ‘this vast, lonely inland

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Cecil Madigan, Marree, 1933.

region', Madigan could not escape Stuart's legacy. His account of his journey, *Central Australia*, first published in 1936, remains one of Australia's most evocative travel memoirs. No stranger to the travails of exploration, Madigan had already travelled to the Antarctic – a 'different desert' – as Sir Douglas Mawson's meteorologist in 1912–13.

In 1929, he'd also taken part in the first reconnaissance flights across Lake Eyre and central Australia. Like so many who would follow him into the interior, Madigan surveyed the country by plane before he tackled it on foot. Pictured at Marree, clad in his finest tweed as one of his Afghan cameleers watches on, he exudes an unmistakable air of gentlemanly authority.¹⁰

Promotional photos aside, Madigan's immaculate appearance would not be maintained en route. Like Stuart, he was on a personal quest to place his name on the honour roll of Australian explorers and, in 1939, he became one of the first Europeans to cross the desert he'd named after the geographer, industrialist and washing machine baron Alfred Simpson, a feat he achieved with nineteen camels and a party of nine in merely twenty-five days. By then, he was a regular visitor to Alice Springs and a 'firm friend' of Constable Bill McKinnon, who fondly recalled Madigan's dust-blown figure appearing in the police yard with his 'string of camels' laden with geological specimens to take back to Adelaide. The two men bonded as they exchanged stories of their treks.¹¹

In 1933, 124 miles north of Alice Springs, Madigan was keen to examine Stuart's method of finding the centre of the continent. As he well knew, 'the term centre of Australia has no exact meaning without further explanation'. The centre of such 'a large, irregularly-shaped area' could be calculated as the furthest point from the coastline, which, as it turned out, was little more than

six miles from Stuart's cairn. Or it could be found by identifying the centre of gravity, or the midpoint between the extremes of latitude and longitude, or simply estimated as an area rather than a precise place.¹²

While Madigan was pleasantly surprised to find that Stuart's calculation was 'quite near the point most remote from any part of the sea shore', he was equally convinced that Stuart had merely found the 'point that looks like a centre'. In his determination to 'fix' the centre, Madigan decided to find 'the centre of gravity of the area'. He proceeded to cut a map of Australia from a piece of 'thin sheet metal' before dangling 'a lead weight on a string across its face hundreds of times'. The result? 'The centre of gravity of the surface area of Australia,' Madigan confidently asserted, 'found by cutting out a map and suspending it from several points together with a plumb bob ... is about ... 257 miles south of Central Mount Stuart.' Almost twenty years earlier, the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey had used a similar method to identify the geographical centre of the USA, suspending a 'cardboard cut-out' map of the US from a piece of string and rotating it to find the centroid – the point at which there is equal volume on all sides.¹³

Madigan's centroid proved to be remarkably accurate despite his crude method. It was only eleven kilometres west of the Lambert Gravitational Centre of Australia, established with the aid of advanced technology in 1988 and commemorated by the erection of a triangular, stainless steel frame – a miniature replica of the flag mast that crowns Canberra's Parliament House.

Not that Madigan was wholly satisfied with his efforts, given that the position of his centre of gravity appeared to be an uninhabited moonscape. Surely the centre of any country was settled? Alice Springs, Madigan reassured himself, 'remains the [true]

centre of the continent, the capital of the Centre, in splendid isolation'. By the 1930s, Australia already had more centres than it required.¹⁴

Few Australians realise that Central Australia has also existed as a political entity. In the mid-nineteenth century, the colony of South Australia stretched from the southern end of the continent all the way to its northern coastline. The area north of the twenty-sixth parallel (the northern border of South Australia today) was originally known as the 'Northern Territory of South Australia'. In 1911, the Commonwealth government assumed responsibility for the entire northern region. In 1926, keen to divide an area that was thought too large to govern, the federal government passed legislation (enacted in 1927) to create two separate jurisdictions: the territory of 'Central Australia', with Stuart (later Alice Springs) as its capital, and the territory of 'North Australia'. When the Depression hit and finance for separate administrations became harder to justify, the Scullin Labor government decided in 1931 to fold Central Australia and North Australia into one jurisdiction: the Northern Territory.¹⁵ The short-lived political entity of Central Australia swiftly returned to its stateless existence: a domain of the imagination.

To picture Madigan gazing at his cut-out metal map of Australia with the plumb bob suspended on a string is to glimpse an entire way of seeing the continent through European eyes. While the explorers strove to demonstrate knowledge of the country by mapping precise coordinates – crossing from one end of the continent to the other, establishing 'lines' of movement and communication across the deserts, and demarcating properties, states and territories from one another – the true centre eluded them. The longer and harder they searched, the closer they came to their own demise.

Sturt was forced back by lack of water, his eyesight permanently damaged; Stuart, almost crippled by ‘infantine weakness’, was carried out on a stretcher; Giles imagined the ‘eye of God’ looking down on him in a ‘howling wilderness’ and, crazed with thirst and hunger, devoured a ‘tiny’ wallaby alive at dawn – while his travelling partner Gibson, like Burke and Wills and Leichhardt before him, was confounded by a country in which only Aboriginal people knew how to survive.¹⁶

Their accounts of their journeys spoke of tortuous ordeals, misadventure and heroic failure. They were unable (and frequently unwilling) to recognise the country’s supple, interconnected, Indigenous heart – etched as it was in the songlines of millennia. What they imagined as determinate was fluid. What they saw as empty was layered with story. Nor could they appreciate the abundance of the centre: water in tree hollows and roots, wild passionfruit and oranges, native figs, bush tomatoes, bananas, coconuts and plums, and the sweet nectar of the honey grevillea. Nor its beauty: flocks of iridescent green and yellow budgerigars, vividly coloured parrots, kingfishers, finches, chats and wrens, striking desert bloodwoods, ghost gums and river red gums, and a vast array of seasonally flowering plants. Where European explorers saw arid desolation, Aboriginal people knew a larder teeming with sources of animal protein and fat and a wide variety of plants that provided nutrition, medicine, tools and shelter.

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In August 2013 – planning to write a history of ‘the centre’ and with no idea that I would soon be investigating a killing – I travelled to central Australia for the first time. Having lived seven years of my life in Europe, I knew the streets of Dublin, Berlin and Copenhagen



far better than the interior of my own country. Like so many Australians, my experience of the continent was drawn from the edge. The coastal cities and the thin strip of towns that cling to the eastern seaboard were my natural domain. I had rarely ventured inland, let alone to the heart of the continent.

Leaving the coast and driving through the flat, open plains of western New South Wales – the sudden wind gusts from passing road trains almost pushing the car from the road – I had the distinct sense that I was moving away from the centre rather than towards it, as if the sheer weight of concentrated population in the south-east corner was drawing me back to the rim of the continent. As I headed west and the country became ever more expansive, the roadside signage and property names emblazoned above passing gates tried to match the transition. Every sign and billboard – standing alone in piercing late-afternoon light – became monumental.¹⁷

As I entered South Australia and headed north, I found that many of the wheat towns that had thrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were now deserted. Hawker, one of

the few towns to survive, surrounded by the skeletal remains of old homesteads, possessed an undeniable death rattle. Along the highway, crows and wedge-tailed eagles busily stripped the carcasses of the latest roadkill, first taking the kangaroo's eyes, then entering via the anus, the softest part of the body, and clawing out the entrails, which lay scattered in thin, bloodied strips on the asphalt. Further north, at the junction of the Birdsville and Oodnadatta tracks, Marree stood like an open-air museum; a rusted, graffiti-covered engine from the old Ghan railway – its rotting sleepers slowly being covered by sand-drifts – lay stranded in the flatlands. Nearby was a remarkably well-preserved adobe mosque (Australia's first), originally constructed by the Afghan community in 1881 and recently rebuilt. The town appeared more vibrant than many others on the road north. Roadside hoardings wickedly proclaimed the health benefits of joining the Lake Eyre Yacht Club. Down by the old railway station, a sprinkling of wooden telegraph line posts – mysteriously left alone by the white ants and fires that had consumed so many others – stood like crucifixes in the desert, petrified by furnace-like winds and raided daily by souvenir hunters, while the new overland communications line marched towards Alice Springs. On top of almost every building, satellite dishes were tilted skywards. Everyone was trying to haul in the outside world.

At the southern tip of Lake Eyre, I saw for the first time the trick the centre plays on us. Walking down to what looked like the water's edge, I found it receded with every step. My initial impression was a glistening lie; the lake was little more than a cracked, salt-encrusted pan. Aboriginal stone tools were scattered along the shoreline. I thought of Madigan, in 1939, driving his truck across the 'dead lake with its unfathomable mud, beneath the thin

crust' on the surface. As he pressed on, he was astonished to find the tyre tracks from the vehicle he'd driven ten years earlier. They appeared 'almost as clear as the day [he'd] left them'. He found the whole experience 'eerie'. When he strode out onto the lakebed at night, the 'only things visible except the stars' were emu tracks.¹⁸

On the road north, I met tourists who had driven the Birdsville and Oodnadatta tracks or crossed the Simpson or Tanami deserts in their air-conditioned four-wheel drives. For so many of them, the journey to the centre was a rite of passage – 'it's something you have to see once in your life'. Like the explorers before them, they spoke of 'god-forsaken', 'awe-inspiring' and 'desolate' places 'in the middle of nowhere'. They seemed drawn to the interior and repelled at the same time – happy, after a few weeks of touring, to return to their coastal homes, now having 'done' the centre. Their determination to traverse the country recalled the explorers in the nineteenth century. Following the 'Madigan Line' as they crossed the Simpson Desert in their vehicles, accompanied by digital readings of outside temperature, time, distance and position, they carved the country into portions, ticking off one after another, following lines and seeking centres, but unable to touch the more elusive, sinuous mystery of its Indigenous pathways. I was one of them.¹⁹

On the western edge of the Simpson, perhaps twenty kilometres north of Old Andado Station, I drove into the desert, crossing several ridges of sand before camping overnight on a stony plain, a brief respite before the next sea of dunes began. Looking out across the gibber plain at dusk, as a full moon rose in the domed sky, I could hear no bird or other sounds of life. The country radiated and demanded silence. Anyone who lived here, as mammalogist Hedley Finlayson wrote in 1935, would surely end up being 'moulded in a solitary habit'.²⁰ The paradoxes were palpable. Here

was a country where the outline of every landform and creature – including human beings – was magnified. Their existence was at once more visible and more insignificant. It laid everything bare at the same time as it pushed all language and emotion within. Words were scarce. They resounded more powerfully in the silence, yet they also seemed trivial amid so much grandeur. The country defied all attempts to describe it. It seemed impossible to come here and not be confronted by the ultimate questions of human existence. The centre was not a place so much as a presence, one in which everything was contained and everything dissolved – one that reminds us we are not at the centre of things. A centre that exposes our hubris and places our existence against a vast backdrop of geological time. No Acropolis or Doge’s Palace could ever stand here. The land itself is the teacher.

I thought of the ‘heritage trail’ followed by tourists as they drove north towards Alice Springs – old homesteads, railway and Overland Telegraph stations in various states of decay, many of them ‘historic sites’ fronted by interpretative panels that tell the story of the settlers’ hardship and misery. Some quote station managers brought to their knees by the ‘solitude and depressing aspect’ of the country, while others speak of Aboriginal pastoral and domestic workers buried in the same ground as their European overlords, all in shallow, unmarked graves in coffins made from nothing more than wooden crates.²¹

At Dalhousie Springs, 160 kilometres north of Oodnadatta, the panels that interpret the station ruins tell of the tragedy that colonisation wrought for all concerned. When construction workers from the Overland Telegraph Line ‘discovered’ the springs in 1870, there were around 400 to 600 Lower Southern Arrernte and Wangkangurru living nearby. In 1901, only three decades after the



station homestead was built, their population had declined to fewer than 200. Years of drought, competition for water and hunting grounds, and the 1919 influenza epidemic further depleted their numbers. By the 1930s, the homestead was abandoned, as many pastoral properties were amalgamated. Faced with yet another drought and the financial crisis caused by the Great Depression, almost all the European workers departed, leaving Aboriginal stockmen to manage the country around Dalhousie. Despite the dislocation of their communities, Aboriginal people worked the stations and maintained their connection to the land.

In their hunger for productive earth, the pastoralists and workers had crossed 'Goyder's Line', yet another imaginary border, which, from the early 1870s, marked the northern-most point where annual rainfall (30 centimetres) was considered sufficient to support European-style agriculture.²² A few good years enticed them further north, a few bad years broke them. Today, driving

the trail of the white man's tears into the centre, it seems that the country has dismissed every attempt to conquer it. As climate change pushes Goyder's Line ever southwards, it's impossible not to wonder how long it will take before the blazing heat and drifting sands claim the Overland Telegraph Line and every ruin left standing. Perhaps this is the deeper source of white melancholy. Alone in the immense antiquity of the landscape, everything Europeans have constructed appears ephemeral – faint static in an ocean of Indigenous knowledge. The centre remains Aboriginal Country.

In 1983, when British writer Bruce Chatwin confronted the 'horror' of Alice Springs – a town he described as 'a hornet's nest of drunks, Pommie-bashers, earnest Lutheran missionaries, and apocalyptically-minded do-gooders' – he slowly came to realise that beneath the thin, hardened surface of European settlement lay the 'Aboriginal Dreaming tracks, [something] so staggeringly complex and on such a colossal scale, intellectually, that they make the Pyramids seem like sand castles'. But how to write about them, he asked, 'without spending twenty years here?'²³

Alongside whitefellas' metaphysical quest for the centre and the insubstantiality of their settlements was the dawning awareness that Indigenous cultures and the Country which gave them life possessed eternal qualities that were both material and spiritual. Trekking alone through central Australia in the late 1970s, Robyn Davidson saw this clearly: the 'big spaces and possibilities' – 'limitless', with their roots 'more in the sub-conscious than the conscious' – spaces she saw as 'metaphors for other things'; ambiguous and elusive.²⁴

No other place in the centre embodied these metaphorical dimensions more than Uluru. When I arrived there after driving from

Alice Springs, I was astounded by what I encountered. The rock's material reality was overwhelming, both immutable and variable. Its eastern flank was reminiscent of a whale's head, and every glimpse of its unmistakable profile revealed another dimension. The uncluttered horizon. The Pacific and Indian oceans more than 1000 kilometres away. A sea of spinifex, mulga and desert oak in every direction; the rock's presence tangible and enveloping, quietening and indestructible: an island in the heart of an island continent.

When Europeans first came upon Uluru, they often searched in vain for the language to describe a place they found incomprehensible. Neither words nor images seemed to do it justice. Merely to set eyes on the rock was to be induced to silence. Convinced from the first moment that Uluru was among 'the most majestic wonders of the natural world', yet lacking the intimate knowledge of its Indigenous custodians, the Anangu, the visitors struggled to convey the deeper emotions they felt in the rock's presence. Although the absence of the ancient cathedrals, churches and monasteries of their motherlands had long troubled them, they slowly began to see that nature had provided them with a place in the heart of their adopted country that gave rise to similar feelings of reverence and awe.²⁵

From the moment of first European contact in October 1872, when the explorer Ernest Giles saw the rock from a distance, and nine months later, when William Gosse climbed 'the most wonderful natural feature' he'd 'ever seen' and named it Ayers Rock after South Australia's five-time premier, Henry Ayers, visitors were overwhelmed by its remarkable isolation. It could be seen 'clear and distinct' from as far as forty miles away.²⁶ William Tietkens, who took the first photograph of Uluru in July 1889, remarked on the 'graceful curves and lines' draped down the



rock's side, which he thought resembled 'an enormous curtain turned into stone'.²⁷ Anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, who led the Horn Scientific Expedition to central Australia in 1894, made a hurried twelve-day side trip to spend just thirty-six hours with 'one of the most striking objects in Central Australia'. After journeying for so long to reach it, and confronting what he called its 'lonely grandeur', Spencer sensed that it held deeper truths about the country itself.²⁸

For countless others who followed, it was impossible to turn one's eyes away from Uluru. Like Chartres and Ely cathedrals in France and England, it rose above the plain; one immense rock, 'splitting the horizon like the temples of an ancient city'.²⁹ Its mammoth proportions had a natural symmetry. 'Regularly domed', it appeared to be sculpted with 'architectural precision'.³⁰ Every part of its surface was rounded and 'almost polished'. Foundations and walls climbed 'perpendicularly on either side for over 1000 feet'.³¹

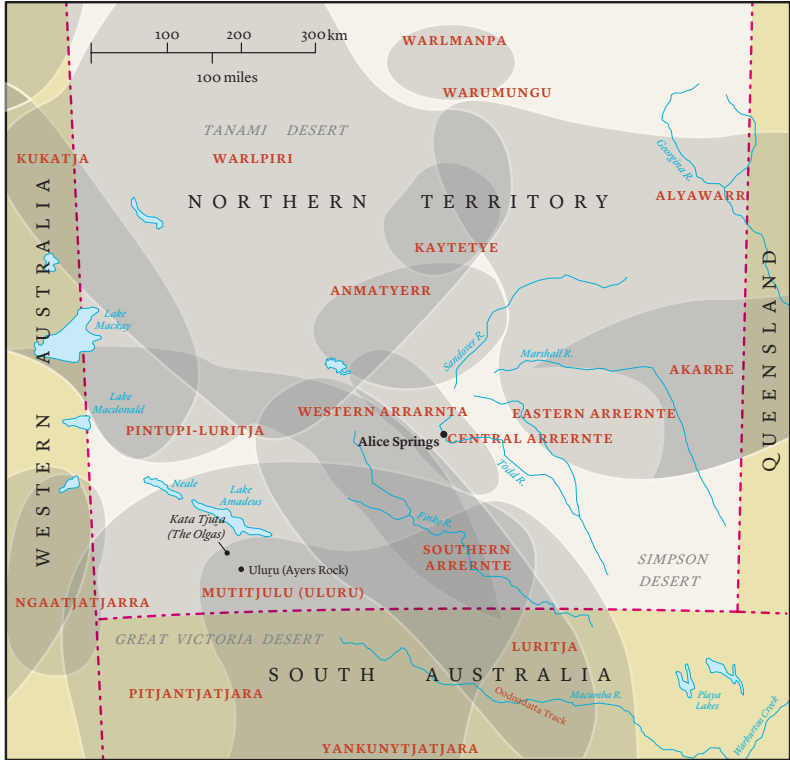
Visitors walked around its perimeter like tourists moving around the outside of Canterbury or Notre Dame, searching for a photographic angle that might capture its magnificence. The rock's caves were like side altars, their walls and ceilings decorated with sacred ancestral drawings. Late in the day, the rock's colour shifted constantly, deepening in the afternoon light from pale, rust-orange to incandescent Venetian red. It was a legendary place of teaching and learning – the meeting point of the Aboriginal people and song-lines of central Australia and beyond – a place of contemplation and worship that rested alone, 'like some huge cathedral' in the desert.³²

By the mid-twentieth century, religious metaphors were legion. In 1950, Sidney Nolan wondered why some of his first landscapes of central Australia 'tended to make cathedrals out of some of the mountains'. 'No doubt,' he thought, 'it is because they are the only cathedrals we possess.' In the same year, conservationist and author Arthur Groom described standing before Uluru and feeling 'like an ant at the door of a cathedral'.³³ Visiting central Australia in 1970, the English composer Benjamin Britten – who stood near a sacred waterhole at Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) and exclaimed, 'Australia hasn't made a sound yet' – saw the rock as the Indigenous version of 'St. Peter's Rome'.³⁴ Since the 1950s, tourist companies have lured visitors to central Australia to gaze at Uluru's monumental proportions. Anne Baulch, who came with the *Australian Women's Weekly* 'All Women Safari Tour' in 1957, never forgot the 'wonderful caves' at the rock's base: 'there were Aboriginal paintings everywhere inside them ... I felt like you feel when you go into a cathedral in Europe or in Britain, an ancient place where people have been, and have been spiritual'.³⁵ Many tourists who have taken the time to sign the 'I did not climb Uluru' register,

kept in the Cultural Centre since the 1990s, have argued that to do so would be akin to climbing sacred houses of worship. It isn't difficult to understand why the analogy has taken such a hold of people's imaginations.

After walking for almost ten kilometres around Uluru's base – dark tongues of algae shooting down the face of the rock where the water had last fallen – I felt that I was in the presence of something that was both invulnerable and transcendent. Perhaps it was Uluru's sublime illusion of permanence. It's staggering to contemplate that the landscape Aboriginal people saw thousands of years ago 'looked much the same as it does now'. Geologists believe the sand dunes of the centre have remained in their present position for approximately 30,000 years. Uluru's monumental 'arkose' – 'a coarse-grained sandstone rich in the mineral feldspar' – was formed over 500 million years ago.³⁶ The 'gravity of the archaic', as author and poet Barry Hill reflected in 1994, has an almost magnetic power, drawing us to journey thousands of kilometres into the centre until we come face to face with the most unforgettable and undeniable statement of the continent's antiquity.³⁷

Of the hundreds of thousands of Australian and international travellers who visit Uluru every year, few can dispense with the maps that appear instantly on their phones and computers and see the country through the eyes of the Anangu. Like everywhere else in Australia, the roads we travel on and the imaginary lines drawn by the Commonwealth to divide state and territory jurisdictions overwrite an intricate network of Indigenous cultures and languages. Of the three main language families that span the desert region of central Australia, those of the Western Desert comprise the largest language group in Australia. They include Pitjantjatjara, Luritja, Yankunytjatjara and Pintupi, all of which are spoken in the Mutitjulu



Aboriginal languages, central Australia.

community near Uluru and throughout southern central Australia. For the Anangu – the Aboriginal people of the Western desert – Uluru is inseparable from *Tjukurpa*, or traditional law, a body of knowledge that is largely kept secret from outsiders.³⁸

Like so many whitefellas before me, I had come here in search of knowledge. I wanted to understand Uluru’s transformation: how was the rock transfigured from a striking monolith to the spiritual centre of the nation? And how did this rapid metamorphosis speak to the centre’s frontier history? It was only after I’d researched more of the history of central Australia and its bloody frontier – so much of its residue still visible today – that I came to see that these two histories are inseparable.

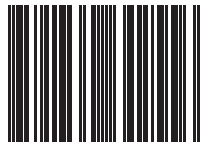
Before John McDouall Stuart planted his British flag in the centre of the continent, he encountered an Aboriginal man near Lake Torrens. He was immediately dismissive: 'he seems to be quite lost,' he wrote, 'and knows nothing of the country'. Like so many uninformed impressions of Aboriginal people, Stuart's blithe remark bolstered the assumption that the land was there for the taking. Nearly a century later, Cecil Madigan saw Stuart's 'penetration' of the continent – as ever, masculine metaphors were the frontline literary artillery of European conquest – as marking the beginning of the 'siege of central Australia'. 'Through no fault of Stuart, or of any man,' Madigan insisted, 'that day marked not the dawn but the end of liberty and the beginning of the extinction of the aboriginal inhabitants of the land ... [for] the European and the Australian Aboriginal cannot exist together'. How wrong they proved to be. Far from retreating into obedient 'extinction', Aboriginal people and their intimate knowledge of Country were indispensable to successive waves of European explorers, pastoralists and miners. Instead of 'vanishing before the advance of a civilization', as Madigan and so many others had predicted, the Aboriginal people of central Australia both enabled European settlement and outlasted it.³⁹

As for Madigan's claim that the drastic reduction in the Indigenous population of central Australia in the wake of the European invasion was no man's 'fault' – it was simply untrue. There was nothing inevitable about the way dispossession occurred. 'Fault' was threaded in all its murky complexity through countless encounters on what quickly became one of Australia's most notorious and brutal frontiers. Australians were still busy securing the Aboriginal lands of central Australia through the use of indiscriminate violence as recently as the 1920s and 1930s.

When I travelled to central Australia, I was unprepared for the way in which the region's frontier past would unsettle the history of the centre I had originally intended to write. What began as one disturbing episode – the shooting of an Aboriginal man by Constable Bill McKinnon at Uluru in late 1934 – slowly became the centre of the book. McKinnon was another seeker of the centre – a man who walked in the footsteps of John McDouall Stuart, Cecil Madigan and so many others. While I'd known of his story for many years, new evidence unexpectedly came to light. Once I asked myself what had happened in his life before and after the shooting, everything changed. What appeared at first glance to be 'a half centimetre high' – the biography of one moment in one man's life – encompassed the entire history of the centre and went straight to the heart of the nation's long struggle to come to terms with its past.

Mutitjulu translates literally as 'belonging to Aboriginal people'. Home to the Anangu at Uluru, it's also the name of a waterhole at the southern end of the rock. It was here, in 1934, that Europeans' awareness of Uluru's sacred significance emerged in tandem with the gruesome reality of White Australia's incursion into central Australia.

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