While most Australians now live in the major cities on the coast, much of the country’s wealth is still derived from the interior, a vast area of scattered and often remote communities, mining towns and pastoral homesteads all linked by what historian J.W. McCarty called the Inland Corridor.

Culturally too the interior looms large: in Australians’ imaginings, in tourism campaigns, and in the arts and media. But despite this, to most it remains an enigma, an emptiness whose distant rural communities and their populations are the subjects of stubborn misperceptions.

Outside Country makes an invaluable contribution to the rethinking of inland Australia. Through essays that mix the broad sweep of history with personal perspectives drawn from diaries, letters, oral histories and literature, it examines the rich and varied social, cultural and environmental histories of regions that continue to play a crucial role in the ongoing development of the Australian nation.
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Chapter 1

Outside Country

Alan Mayne

MOST AUSTRALIANS LIVE on the continent’s coastal plains, and most histories of Australia focus on this dominant demography. However, much of the nation’s wealth and wellbeing – in the present as in the past – are drawn from the continental interior. So too are core elements of Australia’s cultural identity, as historian Geoffrey Serle pointed out long ago in his trailblazing From Deserts the Prophets Come.¹ However, it took rock band Midnight Oil’s performance at the Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony in 2000 to highlight the troubled inheritance that the nation draws from the deep cultural reservoirs, knowledge systems and place attachments of the Indigenous peoples who first possessed these lands.

For 30 years and more, a growing band of revisionist historians has described the impacts that European economic development and nation building have had on the homelands of Indigenous Australians, and the effects of heavy-handed efforts to assimilate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the new nation state.² Several chapters in this book add new elements to this important historical theme. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology – endorsed by Australia’s federal parliament – was a necessary step towards fully acknowledging and rectifying the unfortunate legacy of these impacts, although social justice and empowerment programs have yet to synchronise fully with the parliament’s symbolic gesture.

Still waiting to be told, though, is the broader social history of
inland Australia since European settlement began to spill into the interior plains during the 1820s. Geoffrey Blainey had the intuitive grasp, and John McCarty had the conceptual skill, to begin during the 1980s to outline this history of inland settlement and Indigenous dispossession, but the vast corridors of movement across time and place that they separately sketched – corridors that superimposed European settlement patterns on the footprint of Aboriginal social and economic networks – have still not been comprehensively studied. Similarly, the piecemeal but steadily accumulating findings from rural and regional research by other academic and local historians have not yet been synthesised into a general understanding of Australian history. This is unfortunate, because as Richard Waterhouse demonstrated in his recent historical overview of rural Australia, these inputs extend and deepen knowledge about the Australian nation.

Telling the history of inland Australia not only enhances understanding of the past; it also helps to inform contemporary debate about important and complicated issues for the nation’s future. Four such issues, which this book addresses, are Indigenous wellbeing, gender equality, cultural pluralism and ecological sustainability. It is useful to offer some introductory remarks about each of them here.

Policy initiatives since 2009 aimed at ‘Closing the Gap’ between the life chances available to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians sit uneasily alongside the paternalistic and non-consultative elements of the Northern Territory Emergency Response program, the scaling back of options for remote settlements under the Community Development Employment Project program, the erosion of local engagement in the governance of remote communities, and the mainstreaming of social services for small and dispersed communities into regional hubs.

The appointment in 2010 of Australia’s first woman prime minister, Julia Gillard, highlights the longstanding and energetic engagement by women in all walks of Australian society, most explicitly in the bush (albeit constrained and selectively recognised, as literary classics such as Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’ and Mrs Aeneas Gunn’s We of the Never Never make plain). However, Gillard’s own career and commentary on it reflect the continuing deep-seated nature of gender inequalities throughout Australia.
Like many Australian citizens, Gillard’s parents are immigrants. However, ambivalence about the size and cultural composition of Australia’s immigration program and about multicultural policy are deeply rooted. Anxiety persists about the allegedly corrosive effects of illicit settlement by refugee boat people on Australian living standards and core values. These sentiments need to be assessed alongside the history of both monocultural paranoia and the generally harmonious nature of multicultural interaction in Australia. Significantly, the corridors of movement that transformed the social landscape of inland Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were largely made up of first- and second-generation immigrants of diverse origin.

In Australian folklore the family farm of the far interior is the bastion of Australians’ continuing social wellbeing and cultural distinctiveness, but the number of families living on the land has shrunk drastically over the last 30 years, and farms have merged into giant agribusinesses owned by overseas corporations. The family farmers who still grow citrus around Renmark, Australia’s oldest irrigation settlement (established in 1887), and who have devised some of the most water-efficient irrigation practices in Australia, react with bewilderment and frustration when inadequate water allocations from the ailing Murray-Darling river system are offered to them, while the nation as a whole hesitates to implement comprehensive, equitable and sustainable practices that address water management, environmental degradation and climate change.

To be effective in describing the past and informing choices in the present that will shape the future, historians of inland Australia must attempt to link the broad sweep of national history narratives with regional, local and family aspirations and experiences. Otherwise, the big picture, for all its complexity, lacks a human touch. As local historical societies, community museums and state history councils well know, micro-histories require detailed attention to the lives of ‘ordinary’ people, the mundane material objects with which they carried on their everyday lives, and the parochial place settings within which their social life was played out. By acknowledging the small scale and the everyday – which framed the immediate horizons of Australians in the past as they continue to do today – and by multiplying those
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experiences across time and place, historical analysis can tease out the complex human dynamics of making and remaking the social landscape of inland Australia.

This book of essays is a step in that direction. The history that it uncovers does not pretend to provide an unproblematic chronicle of inexorable progress. It acknowledges disappointments and hardships, the mistakes and the ugly events, as well as the things that elicit respect and pride. It is a history to learn from.

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During the decades leading up to and immediately following Australian Federation in 1901, the ‘brown lands’ of the far interior for the first time acquired a common, though still indistinct, identity in the imaginations of Australians living on the ‘green lands’ of the coastal fringe. These interior lands had not hitherto been given sustained attention by colonists, and were loosely (and often dismissively) called ‘back country’ – lands unoccupied and uncontrollable by the newcomers – as European settlement began to unfold into the apparently kinder lands adjacent to the coast. However, they became increasingly known from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the ‘outside country’, as settlement and a rural economy became consolidated across large swathes of the continent and attention turned to the more distant interior territories as yet untamed. The change in designation from ‘back country’ to ‘outside country’ is significant. Although most Australians still had little knowledge of this outside country, and many were ambivalent about its place in the new nation, they could no longer ignore its existence.

A. J. Vogan commented in 1890 that ‘the little-known and less populated districts of Australia [are] called generally the “outside” country’.5 These lands were concentrated in the Northern Territory (which was administered by South Australia until 1911) and Western Australia, the far west and north of Queensland, western New South Wales, and the north of Victoria and South Australia. Much of Australia’s subsequent social and economic development consisted of efforts to fully possess these lands. South Australia’s administrator
in the Northern Territory, J. Langdon Parsons, drew attention to ‘the reports from the outside country … that the blacks are beginning to understand the conditions under which the white man holds the country of which they consider they have been robbed’. In 1909, even as South Australia conceded that the task of consolidating that ‘hold over country’ was beyond its own resources and negotiated to transfer administration of the Northern Territory to the federal government, the *Adelaide Advertiser* newspaper marvelled at the efforts that were going on in every state of the new Commonwealth of Australia ‘to open up their outside country’.

Those efforts, sustained over the next century, created today’s Australia. The re-settling of inland Australia was a massive project of social engineering that should be more fully recognised as a significant event in the history of the modern world. However, its effects were catastrophic for Indigenous Australians, for the continent’s ecological sustainability, and often for the long-term wellbeing of the settlers themselves. Thus, in taking stock of the history of inland settlement, it is important to understand ‘outside country’ not simply in terms of territory as yet untamed that awaits orderly settlement. The phrase encapsulates territories and ecological systems in which European assumptions about appropriate habitats and social relationships were profoundly tested, a zone in which the colonisers would ultimately have to rethink and adjust their goals and methods for ‘holding country’. This in turn requires a perspective on past events and their implications that lies outside the realms of conventional history. It requires an emphasis on people, places and the consequences of their interactions that have been marginalised in historical knowledge.

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This book contributes to the rethinking of the history of inland Australia since the late nineteenth century. *Outside Country* builds on a previous collection of essays, *Beyond the Black Stump*, which used McCarty’s concept of an ‘Inland Corridor’ of colonial settlement as the first step in that rethinking. McCarty’s Inland Corridor comprised a vast and interconnected arc of mining settlements, farming
regions and rural towns that ran beyond the Great Dividing Range from Queensland around to the Flinders Ranges in South Australia, and continued on through the goldfields and wheat farms of Western Australia, into the Pilbara and the Kimberley, through the Victoria River and Barkly Tableland regions in the Northern Territory, and on again into northern Queensland. In *Beyond the Black Stump* we added to McCarty’s idea of a continental crescent another developmental corridor that ran through central Australia along the line of the Overland Telegraph (completed in 1872) between Adelaide and Darwin. Our intention was to help explain the continental scatter of settlement from coastal cities to inland towns and farming regions, to note the flows of people, goods, and ideas along the connecting corridors, and to reveal the frictions and adjustments that these flows generated. *Outside Country* continues this examination of the Inland Corridors of Australian history (see map opposite), and in doing so develops three connecting threads of analysis.

Part 1, ‘Ecologies’, provides an overall framework for the book by interweaving different methodological perspectives in order to describe the complicated and evolving relationships of people to their environments. Discussion ranges from the changing ways in which historical novels written across one hundred years have characterised the Murray-Darling river system’s effects on the people who trafficked along and lived beside it, to prickly pear abatement in early twentieth century Queensland, rural women’s descriptions of the Mallee and Wimmera during the 1920s and 1930s, and contemporary Aboriginal concerns about the unravelling ecology of the Darling river system in northern New South Wales since the start of European settlement.

Part 2, ‘Footprints’, delves into the flows of people who moved across inland Australia from the mid nineteenth century. We trace the experiences of a Cornish mining family whose members tried their luck at Ballarat, Bendigo, Broken Hill and Western Australia between the 1860s and the 1890s; we assess the enormous expansion of inland railway networks during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century; we explore township life along the timber supply lines (woodlines) to the Kalgoorlie gold mines during the 1930s; and
compare the itinerant lives of cameleers and sex workers along the corridors of inland Australia from the 1880s to the 1930s.

Part 3, ‘On the margins of a good life’, concentrates on livelihoods and wellbeing in inland Australia: on the family farm as it has evolved since the 1830s, in the communities of north-western Tasmania today where cultural and natural heritage industries are gathering pace, at the Cummeragunja Aboriginal community in south-western New South Wales between the 1880s and the 1960s, and through the vernacular histories of the iconic outback mining cities of Broken Hill and Mount Isa.

Notes


7 Adelaide Advertiser, 1 November 1909, ‘The Transcontinental Railway’.
