

Adrian Mitchell

PEAT  
ISLAND

Dreaming and Desecration



Wakefield  
Press

# Contents

Preface		ix
Timeline		xiii
Introduction		i
Chapter 1	Still waters run deep: Deerubbin and the Darkinjung	7
Chapter 2	George Peat and the turning of the tide 1806–1876	22
Chapter 3	Troubled waters: Rabbit Island Hospital 1884–1924	46
Chapter 4	The flood that does not flow 1925–1945	68
Chapter 5	Flotsam and jetsam 1945–1965	91
Chapter 6	Tidelines 1966–1982	121
Chapter 7	Countercurrents: the <i>Richmond Report</i> and after, 1983–1988	146
Chapter 8	Shadows in the water 1988–2000	166
Chapter 9	Drift: the dispersal of Peat Island 2000–2010	186
Chapter 10	River mist 2011–	203
Notes		221
Index		237

# Introduction

Tucked in just below the crest of a steep and well-wooded hill, on a point of land jutting into the Hawkesbury River, a solitary grave slowly moulders into a patch of scruffy, withered turf. It is not concealed but it is out of the way – care has been taken to position it in the lee of an aged sandstone ridge, in a grove of trees and an understorey of bracken. Leaf litter is everywhere. A dramatic gnarled angophora reaches up and out above this last resting place. Gesticulating at the heavens perhaps. Stubbornness itself.

In a country short on a definitive past, gravesites are markers of our history. They tell us that someone was once here, that this is a place that has been lived in. They tell who was here. And if the headstone is legible enough, they may also tell when. This little gravesite, identifiably from our own culture, attests that one of us has been here too. Here is our past, still available to us. To that extent, it allows us an investment in this country.

This particular grave is more poignant than many, not only because it is where a young girl was buried, but because of its location. The grave is solitary but not forlorn – protected from storm gusts, sheltered from the heat, enclosed by the enduring bush. It has found a sanctuary; and it has made a sanctuary. Exactly because this is not in an acre of other funeral plots, all side by side like a vast box

of dominoes, it registers a sense of how special this place must have been for those who chose it, who chose it as an especially fitting site for her memory. It was apt. And it is left for us to contemplate in what way that may have been so.

The ridge just further up from the grave forms an overhang, a shallow cave, with signs of habitation over many years – the stain of smoke from low smouldering fires, and vast quantities of bleached shells, a midden from long ago. Over the countless ages this was home for more people than we can ever know. Perhaps just for limited seasons, for it is not a permanent habitat; it is an abandoned rock shelter. On the evidence, those people lived well, if transiently. North-facing, it would have been warm in the winter sun, shaded in summer. A good place, one would think, to take one's ease, or to rest in peace. The previous owners are no longer here. They passed on long ago. Now this newcomer, who has also passed on.

The grave is more than 150 years old. A white picket fence around it is a recent addition. That is modern. The grave is historical, in our trajectory of history. The shelter and midden, those are very old. And the landscape is as ancient as the continent itself.

A perfect place for a grave.

Here lie the remains of Frances Peat, who died in 1848 at the age of ten, half a world away from all the revolutionary turbulence of Europe, and the fierce declaration of new political ideals. In this distant haunt, at the lower end of the Hawkesbury, quite a different kind of declaration was aired. The philosophers of the preceding century had discovered the virtues of the natural life, and simple living (*'il faut cultiver notre jardin'*) but that kind of peaceable existence had been overthrown by the great revolutions. Along the margins of the great river though the older affirmation could still

be practised. This was, it still is, a remote place, but accessible. The views here were not combative and competitive as in the old world; the views here were of quite a different order. They were – they still are – simply magnificent. Their vast openness, the broad reaches, bespeak a quieter way of living. A choice to avoid the hurly-burly.

Besides, by any count this actually was the old world, the really old world.

The traditional owners of this land, the Darkinjung people, are long gone. The Peat family has left this country too. The great house that George Peat built for himself and his family, a family of girls, that has gone too. He had no son to carry on his family name. He left his name though – it is all over the maps hereabouts. The ferry service he began has ceased, no longer necessary; bridges cross the river now. The road to and from his ferry exists, more or less. The name is preserved, the freeway is a realigned and expanded version of his original track, heading in one direction from there back to Berowra and Hornsby, and in the other up through bellbird country to Gosford.

But those were not his tracks – they were Aboriginal trails. That is a different kind of marker of who has been here before, and of where they went. Just as enduring, if we learn to read it.

Below the site George Peat chose for his house, a small island stands off a little way from the shore. About a hundred years after he first settled in this district, it was given the name Peat Island, but long before that it had an Aboriginal name, Kooroowall-Undi, the place of bandicoots. At the beginning of the twentieth century it became the site of a mental hospital, where men and boys with all sorts of psychiatric conditions were sent, those whom it was thought could never recover. They were there for the rest of their lives. Some

died peacefully on the island, some violently, some by drowning as they tried to escape from themselves or from their constraint. When they were buried, theirs were unmarked graves. As though they had nothing to contribute to our history.

That very absence is their contribution. In the sense that history tells us about ourselves, that absence – that erasure – speaks volumes. This book, for one.

They were sent to Peat Island Hospital to be cared for, but also to remove them from the community at large. In the thinking of the time such a miscellany of misfits was an embarrassment. They were, in effect, outcasts. Only in comparatively recent times has that view been modified, and now reversed. The first step was to separate the psychiatrically ill, the deeply disturbed, from the mentally retarded. Those were quite different diagnoses and called for different kinds of consideration. Then it was decided that this second group should be returned to the community at large, and the hospital was closed down. They too disappeared. That has been another kind of embarrassment, and the hospital languishing, unwanted, unusable, is a further embarrassment again.

This is indeed a sorry country. The traditional owners have long since been dispersed, the Peats left the district and went their several ways – all those girls, though through them is a line of descendants, aptly in echo of the matrilineal line of descent that the Darkinjung acknowledged – the ‘boys’ have all gone from the island and the hospital has been locked up and left behind. Its story, and all their stories, have gone quiet. Unless those stories are told again, it cannot revive. That was the principle underlying the old songlines. That is why we acquaint ourselves with our own history, that is the obligation underlying it.

It is a country of shadows, despite the vast expanse of sky, the immensity of river, the huge rock escarpments. The river itself conceals disturbing undercurrents, its laziness in the sunlight veiling its unrelenting potency. Mythical monsters have surged up from its depths to seize the unwary. The triangular fin of a real monster is occasionally seen stealing up the channel. In the past Deerubbin, as it was first known, has wrought enormous damage; on the other hand, it placidly washes in and out over extensive oyster beds. The cliffs look as old as creation, yet scars of recent rockfalls are everywhere, collapsed ledges, shallow caves where the rock has fretted away. Like the twisting gum trees higher up on the ridges behind, they declare strength and endurance, even as we take in the signs of time's assaults, in the hollows, the seams, the splits.

If we look carefully, though, we may see hints of nesting there. Intimations of life conjoined with hints of defeat. Something is always stirring, promises of growth. Even if nothing more than slow, inexorable lichen.

The island itself, Peat Island, has suffered much from abuse. It was scraped off to bedrock, it was built over with very little regard for aesthetics, it became in time almost a parody of institutional awfulness. Unlovely. Yet, bizarrely, its location is in one of the most beautiful vistas along the Hawkesbury.

Much of the time it looks dark and brooding. The hospital has been left behind, technically vacated but actually abandoned. The shadows of its past have all but congealed. Nevertheless much of what happened here was good, and supportive. It became home for so many residents, more than three thousand across the span of its operation, and they lived out their lives according to the pace this landscape dictates, on the whole a gentle pace. In its earliest days it

was doubtless frightening for the more disturbed of those admitted to its wards, but eventually patient care, clean air and serene views worked their therapy; or worked their magic. Even the casual visitor can glimpse that. Not the bureaucrats in the big city though – they never understood what it was like to live along the wondrous reaches of the Hawkesbury. They have had no idea; and in their most recent draft proposals they continue to show that they have little awareness of either the place or the community.

Like Frances Peat's grave, it can be sobering to contemplate. It is there still, for us to make of it what we will. First, though, we must attend to its story.



## I

# Still waters run deep: Deerubbin and the Darkinjung<sup>1</sup>

The long channel of the Hawkesbury, or Deerubbin, is a natural amphitheatre for the resounding storms that occur from time to time in the mountain fastnesses that surround it. Thunder rolls up and down the valleys, rain in the heights upstream can come down in prodigious quantities. The Darkinjung, who inhabited the country towards the river's mouth, knew its bountiful steadiness, the rise of waters that might follow, the temporary change to the normal course of things. Yet in the longer cycle everything was unchanging, everything stayed as it always was. A rainstorm was a mere passing event.

The cliffs and valleys in the vicinity are riddled with shallow caves and ledges, though as these were liable to collapse at any time the Darkinjung preferred not to dwell in them but to camp in the open. Spirits were known to bring about this calamitous destruction. The people believed that they could counter such malevolence if they whistled before they went to sleep, but even so they preferred to avoid the danger altogether.<sup>2</sup>

The rain in the distant mountains catchment area is at times relentless; and all that water will surge down the long winding length of the river. Extraordinary flooding has occurred in the past, spreading wide across fields and paddocks in the fertile farming districts, damaging crops, destroying property, taking lives. The

record flood of June 1867 raised the river level by an astonishing sixty-three feet. It did enormous damage. Among other losses, the Anglican church at Sackville was swept away, and the wreckage of the church organ was found at Manly.<sup>3</sup>

Yet those very waters have for aeons provided the rich alluvial soil along the middle reaches of Deerubbin, a land flowing with milk and quite possibly honey, if you knew where to look. That is the way of the river, that is the nature of the Rainbow Serpent. Both life and death, giving and taking away, enriching and destroying. As it was, so it shall always be. It is to be respected.

In many places in the interior of the country and in the north, the people have a story that thunder is the voice of the Rainbow Serpent – known to the Darkinjung as Gurria – and lightning the flickering of its tongue, the great totemic ancestor aroused to anger from where it has lain hidden in the depths of some sacred permanent waterhole. It is one of the most revered figures, deeply connected with fertility and with initiation; and they acknowledge its awful authority in ceremony. Darkinjung country is not characterised by deep ancestral waterholes and billabongs, but they knew the authority of Gurria, they knew that life-sustaining water is released by Gurria.<sup>4</sup> They were a people of the rocky ranges and concealed valleys, a people who had over the long ages observed proper ceremony. Their country is rich in rock carvings and stencils and cave paintings. Indeed, their name signifies ‘great carvers in stone’.<sup>5</sup>

The great river Deerubbin sweeps past their country, all the way down to an immense tidal basin; and they were its guardians. The people along the river still know the winter mists as the Serpent’s breath.<sup>6</sup>

In this country the river is the constant by which we may reorient ourselves. It is how we know again where we are, and indeed how we are. It re-establishes our right relation to this place. It is bigger than all that natural disorder, that massive insolent racket. It is as it has always been. It continues. It is primordial.

And here we can observe one of the distinctions between our imported culture, and that of the Indigenous people. For us, it is a fundamental perception – dating back to the origins of Western philosophical thought, back to Heraclitus – that we cannot step into the same river twice. Everything exists in a state of flux, of change. Not so, according to Aboriginal lore. What has been ancestrally created, always is.

Characteristically in our culture we question where the past has come from, we interrogate what happened back when. We seek the sources of things, where the river begins. We come closer to a mutual regard with our first people in acknowledging that the river holds within it what has come from upstream, in acknowledging that the present forever holds the past. We fail though to comprehend how the past likewise contains the present.

And while we ponder all this, the river flows on and on, further and further, until it spreads itself out into the eternal openness of the sea. A river speaks for continuity.

Significantly, we camp, establish our settlements, build our civilisations alongside rivers. Rivers are our premise. They afford us our living. We live by them, meaning beside them as well as because of them. Without water, we are lost. Governor Phillip had to relocate the first settlement from Botany Bay because of an insufficiency of fresh water.

As Deerubbin approaches its mouth, the steady course of the

water is walled in by long stretches of cliffs and crags and crumbling rock faces. Yet the channel there is broad enough that its progress is unperturbed. In the morning light, through the skeins of low lying mist, the river is seen as massive – the name Deerubbin means wide deep water<sup>7</sup> – sliding out towards its estuary, out past branching broadwaters towards the sea.

In its turn, the sea pushes up the main channel, up the various creeks towards stretches of oyster leases, driving its own flood until the tide turns and it recedes once again. Backwards and forwards, the rhythmic ebb and flow like an assurance of something ordained.

One legend is that the river channel was formed by an ancestral spirit, in the guise of a great goanna, dragging its way through the as yet featureless landscape, digging and forming the waterways of Deerubbin, the Hawkesbury. Good spirits moved down after him, as life-giving water followed in its course. We share the same symbolism: water as the source of life, water as consciousness, water as purifying. The goanna is associated with rain in other tribal lore too. It is one of the cardinal emblems of the Darkinjung, one of its six totems.<sup>8</sup> In that way the people guarded the river's foundational legacy, preserving it, honouring it. Minding it, in the fullest sense. Minding the creation.

The story of the ancestral spirit goanna can be readily recognised as a type of Gurria's own activity, creating the water course, throwing up ridgelines, gouging deep gorges.

But we might equally observe that the river, cradled in the massive channel it has carved for itself through ancient rock, intimates that this is how it is meant to be. Deerubbin has made its own place, made a place for itself. It has created itself. As it was, so shall it ever more be, world without end. Change? It is permanent.

Either way, it is profound. It glides over and past intrusions, irrelevancies. Its surge is unstoppable.

This is a country resonant with deep significance, though these days we fail to recognise that, let alone respect it. That is called cultural insensitivity. A failing in us.

In the morning light, when the storms have passed and the mists have thinned out, the river appears utterly imperturbable. It slides along, like a vast silvery grey swathe of shot silk – a river swimming greasily, Kate Grenville thought it.<sup>9</sup>

It is not a river given to reflections. Narcissus would be in no danger here. By its colour it carries a good freight of silt. More often than not the water is a greenish khaki colour, the edges of surface ripples scintillating when the sun breaks through and turns the water blue. Productive topsoil from the river flats, from farms along the tributaries, has been washing downstream for millennia, but especially in the years since the foreshores were cleared for agriculture; in consequence, over the years the downstream ends of the occasional islets have been extended as substantial mud banks. Some low islands are in fact little more than consolidated mud banks, attractive to mangroves.

The original name of one of them, Mud Island, was as definitive as it is unpoetic. Unimaginative, blunt. It was acquired in the 1860s for £1 per acre from an Aboriginal woman, Sarah 'Biddy' Wallace, by one of the early settlers in this district, Robert Milson, and later given his name.<sup>10</sup> Which might be considered some kind of improvement, though doubtless the island also had a long forsaken traditional name. The transfer of the name from Mud Island to Milson Island took place throughout the 1890s and the early years of the new century.

Admittedly land grants were not commonly assigned to Aboriginal people back then, but that was not altogether unknown. In 1835, for example, Sarah Lewis, grand-daughter of the celebrated Bungaree, was granted four acres at the mouth of Marramarra Creek, close to Mud Island.

When the grant was made, Bidy was already living there with her husband, John Ferdinand Lewis. He was a ticket-of-leave man, a lime-burner who collected oyster shells, the plenteous residue from centuries of feasting along the shores of the waterways, and burned them to make lime for mortar – in favourable places these middens might be more than four feet deep. Because Lewis was a convict, the land grant was in Bidy's name. Later in life she was known as Granny Lewis, and buried on Bar Island, though her gravesite has not been located. It would have been known by her own people of course, at least for a time; custom, not white man's custom, preserved.

Downstream from these islands, where the lower Hawkesbury begins the approach to its vast estuary – a huge bay deep enough to be an oceanic blue, and with extensive blue inlets to each side – the river channel widens. The rocky escarpments at each side of the main channel draw back, the river bends around, and the whole constitutes an enormous amphitheatre, a golden bowl filled with sunlight. And, surprisingly, with silence, the kind of silence that falls over the Australian bush in the middle of the day. For the shores with their trees are far enough back that bird calls do not carry, although from time to time the wail of a mournful crow can be heard at a distance; or the squeal of a whistling kite high overhead. Mostly, though, there is no sound. Particularly not at Peat Island. Rabbit Island it was called for the first century of white settlement along the river. Kooroowall-Undi, the place of bandicoots.

The island is wrapped around, embraced, by two points of land coming down from a high ridge. It is well out of sight of the original bridge across the river – that is, the railway bridge, and it is almost out of the line of sight from the first road bridge. It can be seen from down on the extended flat. The bridge for the modern freeway, being closer, has intruded that much more upon the island's serenity; but surprisingly, traffic noise is not particularly disruptive. On the island quietude persists, tranquillity. It is still as it has always been, a sanctuary.

The old trails came through this way too. Although the Darkinjung lived in something of a remote precinct, they were neither isolated nor solitary. They had friendly relations with most of their neighbours, the Dharukk, the Worimi, the Wonnarua, and the Awabakal over towards the coast. They were somewhat apprehensive of visits from the Gamilaroi ('they who said no'), who had a fearsome reputation, but that did not inhibit the Darkinjung from conducting their own raids into Gamilaroi territory to help themselves to new young wives.

The Darkinjung maintained a reciprocal agreement with the Guringal on the other side of the water. In the winter months, when fish move northwards up the coast, the Guringal were permitted to come across and hunt for kangaroo and emu in the Darkinjung forests. In return, the Darkinjung went south in summer when the seasons and the currents changed, again with permission, to gorge themselves on the now abundant seafood. With all this coming and going, of the people, the seasons, the tides and currents, the Darkinjung enjoyed a more rhythmical life than was commonly the case among Indigenous peoples. A peaceable life, on the whole. Just the occasional, inevitable and sometimes urgent deeds of derring-do.

They maintained the pathways through their own country. Long-established routes from Sydney Harbour to what was to become known as the Hunter Valley crossed their tribal land. One path in particular: in 1820 four Darkinjung men showed John Howe, with Ben Singleton, the way from Windsor across the heart of their country all the way to Maitland.<sup>11</sup> It was officially opened as a road, meaning a bridle track, in 1823; when Ben Singleton became the district constable at Jerry's Plains, his name was eventually given to what became a more significant settlement close by.

The astounding aspect of these tribesmen's helpfulness is that the trail, along the course of Wollombi Creek, was of very great antiquity, and an important songline. Their track led close to a ceremonial initiation ground, but it led also to the edge of one of the most significant sacred sites in Aboriginal Australia. From the flattened top of Mt Yengo, the All Father Baiame, creator of life, creator of the Law, creator of ceremony, maker of all things, source of all totems, stepped down into the world; and from there, when that business was finished, he stepped back up again to the sky world, Mirrabooka, the Milky Way.

In a cave or deep overhang at the base of the mountain is a most remarkable painting. A gigantic red ochre figure looms large, its eyes large and all-seeing. It is just under three metres high, the outstretched arms curving right across the back wall of the cave for almost five metres. Baiame stares out across a valley, his gesture an embrace of the whole of life. Like the Wandjina cave paintings, he has no mouth, for Baiame speaks directly to those worthy to hear him, those properly initiated. The knowledge is made available to and within them.

Seven feathers hang from beneath his arms, representing the



seven main tribes in the area<sup>12</sup>, who all gathered at this place for ceremony, and who had customarily traded together up and down the valley. In that sense, the site belonged to them all – and they to it. These day the Wonnarua just to the north see themselves as its guardians, and the eaglehawk, their totem, is often to be seen circling above the site. But it is in fact in Darkinjung territory, whose obligation it was to protect it. The coming of the white man was not likely to have assisted them in that.

Perhaps the thought of the four guides was that as Baiame's authority was so potent, no harm would come from these strange passers-by. As, by and large, it has turned out. This was not country wanted for settlement. The newcomers assumed they could do better.

Mythology is not about exact detail. Its testimony is about large patterns and deep signification. Baiame's son is the one-legged Daramulun, who lives in the trees but is present at initiation ceremonies, in the mound on which the initiation takes place – his is the voice heard through the whirring of the bull roarer. This is serious men's business, which women may not witness. They and the uninitiated are warned away by the rising and falling, the throbbing of that ominous sound. Nor may they look upon the image of Baiame.

Baiame's consort, Daramulun's mother, is manifest as the Emu. She too is a sky dweller, indeed the constellation of the emu in the sky is one of the most important in Aboriginal astronomy, stretching along the vast length of the Milky Way, and most readily visible in the winter months. She could be easily offended if people cooking emu meat allowed the fat to burn. Were that outrage to happen, she would descend through the smoke, thundering during the day,

flashing as lightning at night. Immensely large rock carvings of an ancestral woman, together with emus, occur at different sites along Flat Rock Ridge,<sup>13</sup> not at all far from Kooroowall-Undi. An emu story starts at the mouth of the river;<sup>14</sup> and the emu is another of the key Darkinjung totems. Emu, like goanna, are associated with water – the water emu, sometimes thought of as the black emu, is inviolate.

The profound relationship of the Darkinjung with their country is everywhere apparent; all of it had inherent meaning for them. With so immensely important a site at its centre, songlines must have radiated in all directions from Mt Yengo. With such extraordinary carvings at the ridge above Wondabyne, important trails if not more songlines must have criss-crossed that place too. This was all deeply spiritual country. The extent of their rock engravings throughout their tribal lands attests to Darkinjung awareness of and attention to the Law. The upper reaches of Mangrove Creek, now drowned by a huge dam, a water catchment in contempt of the gift of Gurria, is – or rather was – rich with the evidence of Darkinjung culture. Caves, engravings, tools, axe-grinding grooves, evidence of their culture was just everywhere.<sup>15</sup> All of this encompassing little Kooroowall-Undi, dreaming in a bend of the river. Bandicoot, another of the six definitive totems of the Darkinjung.

This is still deeply spiritual country. You have only to walk through it, and look, and listen. But it has a complicated story, a complication which is of comparatively recent provenance. Perhaps the Darkinjung had their own premonitions of something disturbing. They knew their territory in the sunlight, but they knew also how quickly the shadows fall across it.

For while they drew sustenance from Deerubbin, they also respected its other aspect. The great river might be serene, but it

could be dangerous. It was not to be taken lightly, not then, not now. In their season sharks move up river to give birth to their young in Berowra Creek. The surface is troubled when strong gusts drive down the channel, especially against an incoming tide. Storms spring up out of nowhere. In certain conditions the waters of the Hawkesbury, of Deerubbin, turn eerily dark.

There is something more, though, something other than any of this. The people gave their caution a focus, embodied in an inexactly known figure, the moolyewonk or mirreeular. It appears to have been something like a version of the bunyip. They told each other stories of a large monster rising up from the water to take women and children. Children were always splashing about in the shallows, and it was the women's task to gather oysters and the like from the rocks, and to fish with a hand line – they were always by the river, they were the most readily available victims. The moolyewonk might have evolved as a device to warn the children from going out too far, but the womenfolk were worried by something else too, some nastier abduction than that they feared from tribal raids.

It was believed to be very long, with two sets of flippers and a reptilian head. On the rocks the people drew images of what they believed it to be like, for example, at a cliff near Wiseman's Ferry, images of what paleontologists might recognise as a plesiosaur. But mostly their descriptions are in their stories. Approximations.

Whatever it was, whatever it had been, something dark lurked in the water, some hidden menace; and the moolyewonk was by way of an explanation for inexplicable disappearances, for abrupt intrusions into their experience of normality. For the irruption of the unknown into the placid present, destroying continuity. Something, one might think, beyond the Dreaming. That is, unthinkable.

At times, aspects of that darkness made itself felt through the Darkinjung themselves too. Whereas in 1820 four men had obligingly shown an established pathway through their tribal lands and up to the Hunter Valley, an amicable gesture, within just a few years relations had soured. A party of warriors attacked a farm on the Hunter River and killed two men; after that they went down to the far end of their tribal lands, to the Hawkesbury, and returned along the Bulgar road, the trail that led close by Mt Yengo. Along this way they chased some mounted settlers and, stopping at a hut in Putty, killed a man and wounded another; a third escaped to Richmond.

The perpetrators and others from Wollombi, including women, began to drift down towards Richmond, and were met by a punitive party sent out from Windsor. These set about their brutal business, 'dispersing the natives', shooting down the innocent as well as the offenders, apparently without any casualties and having already cleared the ground of a friendly clan – that is, without 'casualties' to the military, as the governor's report to the Earl of Bathurst noted in passing.<sup>16</sup> The surviving local people melted away to a hidden valley in the Putty ranges, but still within the purview of Baiame. A skirmishing war had been declared, a lopsided running battle. Those who fled into adjacent tribal lands risked being killed for trespass – except perhaps towards the coast, on Awabakal lands. These traded with each other regularly, the Darkinjung bringing axe heads, for example, from the volcanic stone of Mt Yengo. They shared many similar beliefs.<sup>17</sup> If the Darkinjung were to find sanctuary anywhere, it would be there. Otherwise, inevitably, their numbers were whittled away.

By 1880 the authorities had brought together those they could find and located them on a reserve at Wheelbarrow Ridge, where

the last recorded corroboree by that tribe took place. A remnant people were spread all through the land, however: intermarried with settlers, soldiers, shepherds, ex-convicts. Given that the Darkinjung recognised a matrilinear line of kinship, their connections remained more intact than the authorities knew.

And their country abided still, both up among the sandstone ridges, and down along the river. Little Kooroowall-Undi looking out on the passing stream. Unvisited.

Change was afoot, however. River craft were passing by, sailing up and down carrying produce to the Sydney markets, bringing back supplies. More and more strangers were clambering around through the bush looking for land on which to settle. The sound of saws and axes began to be heard echoing across the valleys. The first few newcomers were making a mark in the bush, but a far greater number were passing through as river traffic. Shingle cutters, fishermen, lime-burners, even a scattering of smugglers. They observed the various landmarks and gave them names of their own devising. Even though this country was already named, had long ago been sung into existence and still had its songlines. Ignorant or indifferent, the newcomers were making it over and taking it over.

In 1841, the *Sydney Herald* reported on the various islands on the lower Hawkesbury, 'That to the east [of Mooney Mooney Point] is termed Goat Island, having many of those animals grazing thereon, the other Rabbit Island, which is numerously stocked as a Rabbit Warren'.<sup>18</sup> That appeared to be Kooroowall-Undi's new name, the name by which the increasing numbers of passers-by recognised it. A crudely utilitarian name, just as unimaginative as that of its near neighbour Mud Island.

But therein lies a problem. Notoriously, Thomas Austin released

twenty-four rabbits into the wild at his estate at Barwon Park, near Geelong. That was in October 1859; the subsequent invasion of Australia is generally held to have begun there, well after the date of the *Sydney Herald* article. Yet this report refers to an already established detail. If rabbits were the basis for that new name, then they had to be on the island well in advance of 1841.

In fact, cages of rabbits had been brought out with the First Fleet, to provide meat for the officers and gentlemen. These were domesticated rabbits, bred for eating; not like the wild ones introduced at Barwon Park for hunting. Alexander Macleay at Elizabeth Bay House had a rabbit warren, a paddock surrounded by a stone wall, 'and well stocked by that fair game'.<sup>19</sup> Regrettably, in the 1840s notices began to appear in the papers reporting the theft of rabbits from the gentry's houses. That might be the source of the population on Kooroowall-Undi. Or even just as possible, George Peat may have taken advantage of the island's proximity, and imitated the gentry by establishing his own source of rabbit meat.

And yet, and yet. Anyone who has visited Norfolk Island can see for himself or herself what happens when a little island is given over to rabbits. Off the coast from Kingston, Phillip Island, also commonly known as Rabbit Island (that is, what Harold Cazneau for one called it, in his photograph of it) is only in recent years beginning to repair from its wholly denuded, wretched state. Even in the earliest photographs, Kooroowall-Undi was in nothing like such a state of deterioration, not until the island was cleared and levelled to bedrock for its new incarnation. At nearby Dangar Island, Mrs Agnes Fagan saw for herself the damage that could be done there. She visited at the end of spring, 1885, and recorded that rabbits had infested the place, and were eating the bark from all the trees and

shrubs.<sup>20</sup> So a question mark is left hanging in the air. Had there in fact been all that many rabbits? Enough to determine its new name?

And whatever happened to the bandicoots, which were its original residents?

Noel Johnson wrote in his *History of Brooklyn* that Peat Island was called Rabbit Island 'because at one time experiments on rabbits were carried out there'.<sup>21</sup> Presumably, those experiments would have been about how to exterminate the brutes – which did not become an issue until the rabbit plagues of the late 1880s and thereafter, by which time its European name had been long established. So his hypothesis is unlikely. He appears to have confused his local history, too, as the trial of means to exterminate rabbits was conducted on Mud Island, in 1908.

John Powell offers the dispiriting advice that the island was so named 'because its shape is said to resemble a rabbit'.<sup>22</sup> That could have been so, though he provides no source for this confident affirmation. There is no end to imaginative resemblances, as any tour guide in a limestone cave will unfailingly demonstrate.

The island itself remained uninhabited. Inconveniently it had no water (another problem for a numerously stocked warren, incidentally), and the river water was brackish at best. So it was still left to its own devices, dreaming. Dreaming itself into being, the Dreamtime.

But the tide was turning. Something was imminent, stirring. While the river rolled on as ever, the island and its environs were about to face a rough awakening.