

Provisional Title: Placing the Post in the landscape of colonial memories: revisiting the memory of a colonial frontier.

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Paul Fox closes his exploration of the institutionalisation of memory within museums with the question “do Australians inhabit a postcolonial world or a landscape of colonial memories?” [Fox, 1992, 317] The question forms for him out of an analysis of the ways in which the orderings of aboriginality and space of the colonial museum continued to haunt Australian cultural imaginaries in the early 1990s. Fox traces how colonial museums ordered their knowledge always in reference to the imperial centre, accomplishing a kind of double colonialism – reinforcing “the European acquisition of space” while ensuring that, for the “former peripheral city of empire ... memory exists in and belongs to a system of knowledge created elsewhere” [ibid, pp. 308-9]. It seems to me Fox posed his question to invite a response affirming the colonial quality of Australian memory. However, considering his question in 2005, ‘post’ the debates over race, reconciliation, and history that dominated the turn of century, elicits a more uncertain response in me. Institutionalising memory in Australia is now a highly politicised process involving a complex array of stakeholders, such as governments, museum professionals, and indigenous and non-indigenous communities. The outcomes often redraft imperial knowledge into self-aware narratives of colonial domination and appropriation, albeit inciting new debates over the ‘balance’ between recuperation of indigenous loss and survival and celebration of successful settler-colonial subjects as tropes of national memory. Do such outcomes unsettle the ‘knowledge from elsewhere’, rescripting landscapes of memory in post-colonial tropes? Are colonial memories always a landscape constructed from the past? Or is the present making new nets of it’s own that make the ‘post’ in the colonial ambiguous or uncertain?

This paper explores these questions through a study of the social memory of a colonial frontier in the southeast of South Australia. Drawing on Healy’s conception of social memory as a “network of performances” in which “relationships between past and present are performed” (1995, p. 5) the paper focuses on the ways in which one colonial ‘memory’ of the frontier, Mrs Christina Smith’s book *The Booandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: a Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends, and Language*, first published in 1880, is performed in two contemporary renderings of the social memory of colonialism: the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre, in Mount Gambier, South Australia, and the writings of Mrs Heather Carthew, great granddaughter of Mrs Smith.

Christina Smith’s slim volume, as it’s title indicates, sets out to record the ways of the Buandig as a testimony to their final – presumed inevitable – passing. However, only forty one of the book’s one hundred and twenty nine pages are given over to this. The rest of the book documents the rationale and experience of Christina Smith and her family in proselytising the Buandig, told through her own memoirs and the memoirs of various Buandig people who either converted or professed to acknowledge the

Christian god on their deathbed. A number of the brief accounts are also 'success' stories of the Aboriginal children Christina fostered in her own home. This reverses the order of the book's frontispiece, where a secondary title in very small type is an 'Also': *An Account of the efforts by Mr and Mrs James Smith to Christianize and Civilize them*. Mrs Smith's little text is therefore, firmly within the missionary genre of 'appeal' (indeed, she describes herself as a 'missionary and teacher' in the Preface to the book, although neither she nor her husband were formally attached to a missionary society). The book constructs the Buandig as an appropriate object for her civilising and Christianising agency. As such, the book is hardly controversial as a product of the nineteenth-century evangelical sensibilities of the 'civilising mission'. However, the text is somewhat less conventional in terms of the norms of the Australian colonial frontier in its conviction of Aboriginal humanity and its strident opposition to violence and Indigenous degradation. Although, as Henry Reynolds documents in *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (1998), there were always white colonisers who resisted elements of racist ideologies, policies and practices towards Indigenous peoples, notably that strand of religious discourse that included Aboriginal people in a common humanity in order to argue for their assimilation into 'civilised' society. Where Smith's text becomes more controversial is in how her nineteenth century narrative is re-presented in contemporary representations of the colonial past. Her life and work are now celebrated in local social memory, in part because it is through her recollections that the Buandig people achieve a visibility and historical presence.

Opened in 1996, the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre is an imaginative local government-funded attempt to explore the pre-history and history of the Mount Gambier region to the time of first European contact. The Centre charts a path through the area's fascinating geological history to the presence of the Buandig, the first nation of the region, the destruction of their society, and, finally to a facsimile of the Lady Nelson, the British boat from which Mount Gambier was sighted and named by Lt. James Grant in 1800. The representation of the Buandig's tragic story is graphic. Photos and text consisting mainly of extracts from Mrs Smith's book, describe aspects of Buandig culture and history, and narrate the deleterious impact of the colonial frontier on the Buandig in some detail. This latter is given a more unconventional presence in a 'spectra vision theatre' which provides a visual and aural representation of "... the ghostly figure of Christina Smith telling her story of mediation between Aborigines and the early settlers of the district" (pamphlet, nd). The exhibition is quite remarkable for its powerful depiction of Aboriginal presence in terms of longevity, culture and history, and in its critical view of the impact of settler colonialism. Few other provincial museums focus so directly on the story of conquest and its consequences for the indigenous peoples of the continent.

Heather Carthew wrote about her great-grandmother's life and role in local history and tourism publications and in two novels based on Christina's published and unpublished writings, (1973, 1986; 1993) and the unpublished diary of her eldest son, Duncan Stewart, who spoke several of the local indigenous dialects. The paper focuses on the two novels written by Mrs Carthew. Staying close to the historical record provided by Christina and Duncan, the two novels embellish the original accounts of the adventures and relationships they had with the local Indigenous people they befriend with a sense of drama and emotion. In Mrs Carthew's texts, the Smith family are involved in a constant struggle against frontier barbarism, black or

white. White frontier society is depicted as a radical dichotomy between the 'good' religious, educated and respectable settlers and the 'bad' irreligious drunkards and ex-convicts. While Buandig society is also portrayed as violent and cruel, it is the child-like excesses of 'primitive savagery' rather than the wilful wrong headedness of the 'bad' white settler that is the problem. The solution is to accord the Buandig equality before the law, on the basis of a shared humanity, not in terms of an active citizenship but in terms of protection: from the 'bad' whites and from their 'savage' selves.

The paper deconstructs the ways in which Mrs Smith and her texts are taken up and used in these two sites of social memory to contest/resist colonialism and its memories. The paper charts how discourses of whiteness, gender and benevolence combine differently in the Discovery Centre and the novels to work to recolonise the memory of colonialism in ways no less dismissive of the Buandig and indigenous presences – historical and contemporary. The failure of these texts to produce 'post colonial' landscapes of memory is not, I argue, because of the continuing grip of colonial memory, as Fox suggests, but rather because of the limitations of contemporary ways of working social memory. Caught in a modernist emphasis on singularity, both sites are unable ultimately to perform the polyphony of colonialism, instead decentring the imperial centre only by centring the 'good white woman' – Mrs Smith. Mrs Smith's text however, does offer up other possibilities for constructing a 'counter memory' that might begin to locate an Indigenous sensibility and historical agency within social memory sufficient to justify 'post' colonial memory work.

References

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