

Promoting Western Australia in text and image

Peter Spearritt

Companies, governments, institutions, even religious groups have long been in the business of promoting themselves, for a variety of reasons and with a variety of outcomes in mind. With the establishment of colonies in Australia, both individual settlements and the governing entities wanted some way to identify themselves. Apart from oral communication, the most common form of communication and identification happened through text and/or image.

The invention of printing and the later establishment of newspapers enabled news to be circulated in cities and towns. The coming of regular postal services enabled both printed items and hand written letters to be sent almost anywhere. The post even produced a new form of communication, the post card, with an image on one side and a hand-written message on the reverse.

As an island continent the Australian colonies make an intriguing study in conquest and land settlement, the growth of population, the introduction of mechanised transport and the development of manufacturing. Cultural institutions from schools to churches were soon grafted onto a grand landscape where the scale of prior Aboriginal occupation was occasionally acknowledged but rarely dwelt on.

These issues of communication with the wider world, of the need for community and promotion, are of special importance to Western Australia, the most isolated of all the Australian colonies. In this article I concentrate on how government agencies and promotional bodies have attempted to capture WA in text and image in the twentieth century. In the 1920s the official government account started with the Dutch explorers 'who came and saw but did not conquer', for reasons they made plain in their terse, oft-quoted 16th century terse assessment:

Coastline treacherous, mainland waterless, inhospitable and unfit
for habitation by white people, natives hostile.

The hoisting of the Union Jack, where Albany now stands, on Christmas Day 1825 marked 'the consummation of possession'. With the colony proclaimed on 7 June 1829 the western portion of the continent became definitively secured for the British Crown.¹

From this emblematic government account account, key elements can be discerned about how Western Australians thought about and portrayed themselves in both text and image, from maps and photographs to drawings and paintings. These recurring notions include

- WA as a third of the whole continent, with grand open spaces
- the presence of Aboriginal people in many parts of the state
- WAs 'leap to fame' through gold discoveries' in the 1880s and 1890s

¹ *Western Australia: Its early vicissitudes, romantic awakening, development and progress*, issued by the authority of the Premier, Hon. J. Mitchell, Perth, Government Printer, 1920, 112pp

- -WA as a ‘cinderella state’ where stout hearts took some time to secure a permanent prosperity resting upon the infallible base of agricultural development
- WA a place to visit because of its climate and its natural beauty, symbolised by its wildflowers

These themes re-occur in most government, travel and promotional literature about Western Australia from the 1920s to the 1960s, with the notable exception of Aboriginal people who are almost entirely written out and visually absent from the tourist booklets and brochures of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

Like most government publications of this era, *Western Australia: Its early vicissitudes, romantic awakening, development, and progress*, opens with a map of agricultural and pastoral lands, with separate maps to show goldfields and mining, rainfall, and timber (only in the south-west). The frontis piece image of wild flowers is followed by a small photograph of seven Aboriginal men and women in a combination of traditional markings and western dress. Intriguingly, the final image in the book is a full page portrait of a naked Aboriginal man, photographed from the back, with full skin markings, and surrounded by hand-drawn decorations of a boomerang, shields and spears.

Governments around the world regularly produce worthy publications proclaiming the virtues of the territory they oversee. In federal systems, like Canada, the US, Australia and Germany such publications often take on the role of special pleading as well. The Australian colonies and subsequently the Australia states have always been in a competition for investment, from both local and overseas sources, for infrastructure – from railways to freeways – and for new sources of population. Most government promotional brochures and booklets produced throughout Australia from the 1870s to the 1930s were principally aimed at securing investment and migrants, especially people keen to settle on the land.

* * *

Partly because it is so isolated, the imagery of Western Australia has had more specific attention – at the state level – than any other of the Australian states. This scholarly interest appears to have begun with the work of George Seddon, whose book *Swan River Landscapes*, published by UWA Press in 1970, is the first major Australian study to place the built environment firmly in the context of geology, flora and the impact of urban growth. In a book of extraordinary breath Seddon displayed a catholic interest in landscape formation and built additions, from public toilet blocks to gasometers. He writes:

As soon as we turn on the tap in Perth we dramatically transform the environment. An estuary and its foreshores in a city which will rise within a few decades to a million people or more cannot remain set wholly in virgin bushland...Cosmopolitan politics are to be desired, but that is no reason why every place should look like every other place. ...soon the only genuine tourist experience left will be to visit the U.S.A., because it is the only place where the locals are not putting on a show for the Yanks.²

In Seddon’s first book there is remarkably little interest in or attention given to Aboriginal sites or ways of using the land. Seddon’s landscapes are largely a tableau

² UWA Press 1970,p.67

raiser that Europeans have either left alone or remade into English gardens. In his magnum opus *Sense of Place: A Response to an environment: The Swan coastal plain Western Australia*, Seddon includes a chapter entitled 'Aboriginal and European' in which he traces the extent of violence and dispossession, that 'Aborigines new the land', practiced fire-stick farming, but concludes 'from the outset, the Aboriginal inhabitants were doomed'.³

Almost two decades later Tom Stannage, in his *Embellishing the Landscape*, studied the work of the British born photographer Fred Flood and the British-born illustrator Amy Heap. In their work for periodicals, including the *Western Mail*, they emphasised cottage style living in the grand spaces of Western Australia and the power of the locomotive to conquer vast spaces.⁴

In their *The Gate of Dreams*, also published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1990 Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile examined the prose and imagery of Western Mail annuals from 1897 to 1955. Both the weekly *Western Mail* (1885-1955) and the annual, established a little later, were subsumed by *The Countryman* and ceased to exist as distinct publications. The equivalents in some other states, such as the *Sydney Mail* (1864-1938) had already bit the dust, while some other annuals, including the *Courier Mail Annual*, hung on until the 1960s.

Murphy and Nile point out that by the time the newspaper annuals began, in the last years of the 19th century, Aborigines were already perceived as a 'residual or dying culture'. They analyse a full-page 1904 illustration, describing it thus:

Aborigines, together with their implements, are rendered merely static relics of a once-flourishing culture. By enclosing their figures in picture frames common to European art display and preservation, Stanway-Tapp [the illustrator] implies that Aboriginality had come under the auspices of that culture. The Christmas greeting, written in a friendly hand, translates as Christian rituals superimposed over primitivism.⁵

I interpret the image rather differently. Certainly the photographs, which have been re-etched, are depicted in a pictorial manner but the landscape is still harsh, the images are not of a people defeated, and the level of detail in the weapons and cooking utensils depicts a fascination with Aboriginal culture and an recognition of prior Aboriginal occupation of the land. While there is remarkably little prose discussion of Aborigines in the popular media in the first two decades of the twentieth century, visual acknowledgement of their existence is widespread, even in real estate advertising publications.⁶

The closest study of the photographic depiction of Aborigines in WA has been undertaken by Joanna Sassoon in her doctoral study of the photographs of E.L.Mitchell between 1908 and 1930. For much of this time Mitchell worked for government agencies, and often had bureaucratic masters who were very conscious of the power and use of imagery in government publications, from official reports to

³ UWAP 1972,p.190

⁴ *Embellishing the Landscape: The Images of Fred Flood and Amy Heap 1920-1940*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1990

⁵ *The Gate of Dreams* p.28

⁶ For Sydney examples in the first two decades of the 20th century see P.Spearritt, *Sydney's Century* (UNSWP 1999) pp.7 and 246.

promotional items. Sassoon establishes that Mitchell's photographs of many aspects of WA life were recycled up to three decades later, and argues that in the case of his Aboriginal images this meant that Aboriginal culture, when it was portrayed, came across as 'static and unchanging'.⁷

Aborigines didn't feature at all (either as part of the landscape or as potential workers), in the 86 pp booklet *Western Australia: For the Settler*, issued by the Minister for Lands in 1925. Aimed primarily at England and Scotland, potential settlers were told that the conditions of land selection were 'the most liberal which have ever been known in the history of colonization' being unequalled' by any other Australian state or British dominion. A 'man who carves out a home for himself and subdues the virgin bush' would soon become a true empire builder'⁸ Intending colonists were offered agricultural advice, cheap loans up to 2000 pounds from the State Agricultural Bank and free education, even at the University level.⁹

These decades also saw the development of a small domestic tourism industry, kick started by the railways and ably assisted by a variety of government departments quick to realise that photography and advertising would not only attract tourists but help put their places on the map. Beauty spots had to be opened up, so both the Victorian and New South Wales railways created mountain guests houses (Mt. Buffalo, Jenolan Caves) which were never with coo-ee of a railway. In Western Australia government intervention in travel and tourism extended to creating a network of state-owned hotels.¹⁰

Attracting tourists to the west has always been hampered by its relative isolation from the rest of Australia. With a tiny local market ship, rail and subsequently air connections have always been crucial to the accessibility of the west. The western colonists, reluctantly wowed into the federation by the promise of a trans Australia railway, had to wait until 1911 for the Commonwealth Parliament to make good a start on the grand venture

The opening of the railway in 1917 occasioned much commentary and had an immediate impact on both western and national imagery. The 1051 miles of 4 foot 8.5 inches track linked Port Augusta to Kalgoorlie, 330 miles of which had not one curve. The railway unions produced banners showing the band of steel that united the continent, conveniently neglecting to mention that the entire route, going through three states, had three different railway gauges. For travellers leaving the ship at Fremantle, the railway promised to get you to Melbourne three days quicker than if you continued your journey by ship, with the added attraction of avoiding almost inevitable bouts of seasickness through the Great Australian Bight. The 1927 Trans Australia brochure emphasised a landscape 'unbroken by hill or valley, by tree or

⁷ An Archaeology of Memory: A biography of photographs taken by E.L. Mitchell 1908-1930, PhD thesis, University of WA, 2001

⁸ Government Printer, Perth, 1925, 86pp, p.5

⁹ *ibid*, pp. 15, 41.

¹⁰ See Jim Davidson and Peter Spearritt, *Holiday Business: Tourism in Australia since 1870*, chapter four. See also *Western Australia Tourist Guide and Accommodation Directory* (Perth WA Government Tourist Bureau 1928-29 to 1938-39)

house'. Travellers were exhorted to consider taking up land selections along the route. Incoming pastoralists were reminded that they needed sufficient capital to provide water supply and fencing.¹¹

In the interwar years Western Australia's sense of isolation continued unabated, despite the Trans Australia Railway. Every time an eastern state put on a big event, WA would produce a promotional brochure to go with it. For the sesquicentenary celebrations of the British claiming Australia, which took place in Sydney in 1938, the WAGTB produced a brochure headlined: You Must come and see Us too! Before any mention of the First Fleet and the founding of Sydney, the brochure writer highlighted the earlier 'discovery' of WA by the Dutch. Sydney was credited with being the site of 'formal possession'.¹²

Tourism promotion understandably fell away during the second world war, with the first major promotional campaign starting in October 1946 when the WA Government Tourist Bureau issued its *Springtime in Western Australia*, a 20 page black and white brochure with a colour graphic cover of a young girl in a yellow dress carrying a bunch of wildflowers. In this campaign, which lasted for some years, the emphasis is on wildflowers in the bush, the jarrah and karri forests, and caves. The only natives that figure in this text are the 'native trees', with the exception of Lord Forrest, Australia's only native-born peer. Urban WA is represented by the view of Perth from King's Park, a Cottesloe beach scene and the main building of the UWA campus.¹³

Despite the railway, ships were still vital to the link between the eastern states and WA, and the only link with the rest of the world. From the 1830s to the 1960s most commercial passenger ships travelling from Brisbane/Sydney/Melbourne to Europe called in at Albany and later at Fremantle, so the first sight that many easterners ever got of WA was from the deck. The 1951 edition of *Holidays: Western Australia* featured shipping baggage on its front cover to a backdrop of the ocean waves. In the by now standard introductory recitation, we learn about the foundation of the colony, the discovery of gold, the mining industry reaching 'its zenith in 1903', fat lamb, timber, tourism the wildflowers. In an introduction of well over 2000 words, which ranges over the full gamut of the state's settlements, there is not one mention of indigenous Australians. They have now been excised from textual accounts, and in this brochure and most others of this era, they are also absent from the photographs,

Two thirds of this 44-page brochure is devoted to a description of places offering accommodation. The entry on Broome says nothing about its racial mix, the entry on New Norcia does not mention that it is a mission, noting that valuable works of art 'make a strong appeal to the refined taste of many' and the entry on Rottnest Island makes no mention of its use before the Board of Control in 1917 declared it 'a pleasure resort for the people'.¹⁴ This sanitised approach to WA remained common

¹¹ *Save Days: Travel in comfort across the Continent*, Commonwealth Railways, Melbourne, 1927

¹² *The Western Third of Australia*, WAGTRB, Government Printer, Perth, 1938

¹³ *Springtime in Western Australia*, Government Tourist Bureau, Perth, October 1946, print run 10000

¹⁴ *The Western Australian Holiday Guide of the Principal Towns and Holidays Resorts*, Government tourist and Publicity Bureau, Perth, Government Printer, Perth, May 1951, print run 25,000.

throughout the 1950s, although by 1956 the standard brochure did include one photograph of Aboriginal rock and cave drawings as the last illustration in the publication.¹⁵

The rapid growth of car ownership in the 1950s saw the burgeoning of a new kind of tourist guide, first seen in the late 1920s and 1930s, the car-based travel guide. The Redex Trials, a round Australia car competition, on shocking road conditions, caught the public imagination. The automobile clubs started to publish accommodation guides and a new form of accommodation, the motel, the 'motor hotel', imported directly from America, invaded the Australian landscape. The 146 page *Western Australian Tourist Guide and Speedo Road Chart* carried an enormous quantity of advertising enabling it to be circulated free throughout Australia. It promoted all of the better-known WA holiday places, from Rottnest Island (a camper's paradise) to the fire look out tree in Pemberton, depicted to make it plain that only people without even a hint of vertigo should attempt to climb the ramshackle ladder. Publications of this era emphasised that WA offered modern hotels, some boasting telephone and hot water in every room.¹⁶

WA's concern about being overlooked by the Eastern States reached new heights in 1956 with a tiny government tourist brochure entitled *Olympic Visitors should see Western Australia*. It opened in delightfully parochial style, hailing WAs olympic champions, while proudly pointing out that the state only had seven per cent of the national population. The 16 page pamphlet contained no information at all about how to get to Perth or how much it would cost.¹⁷ Finally, WA got its very own international event, winning the right to host the 1962 Commonwealth Games. Elegant brochures were produced and travel posters commissioned to mark the event.

The first serious guidebook on Perth appeared in 1962. Released to co-incide with the Commonwealth Games, it also became the first authorially-driven travel guide in Australia, the opening volume in Jacaranda Travel Guides.¹⁸ Later volumes included Patricia Rolfe *The Blue Mountains* and Jean Stranger's *The South Coast of New South Wales*. Guide books as such had been common before then, and sometimes they had named authors, including the motoring writer Keith Windsor, but they remained accommodation-based guides with advertising. Even C.B.Christesen's *Queensland Journey*, a lavish 146pp book published by the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau in 1939 contained paid advertisements and hyperbolic prose.¹⁹ The Jacaranda Series became the first properly authored, unsponsored travel guides about Australia, modest precursors to the internationally oriented and globally marketed Lonely Planet guides of the 1990s.

Perth and the South-West written by John Graham, appeared in casebound and paperback in 1962. Graham opened by observing that WA had little in common with

¹⁵ *Western Australia*, Government Tourist and Publicity Bureau, Govt. Printer, Perth, February 1956, print run 15000,80pp.

¹⁶ Printed by Alpha Print, Perth, 1955 (first edition 1953?)

¹⁷ WA Government Printer, September 1956.

¹⁸ Others in the series included Patricia Rolfe on the Blue Mountains and Jean Stranger on the South Coast of NSW. Keith Willey's announced volume on the Northern Territory didn't see publication and the series appears to have folded in 1964.

¹⁹ See P.Spearritt ed., *Seeing Brisbane 1881-2001*, Brisbane Institute, 2002

the ‘highly developed tourist areas of Europe and America’, but offered the attractions of isolation, enabling visitors to ‘camp and fish in places where Nature has not been invaded by the neon sign and the hamburger bar’ and a relaxed way of life without the necessity to tip for service.²⁰

Reflecting the rising importance of the aeroplane, Graham’s first chapter opens with air travel, recording the Perth to Adelaide flight as one of the longest inter-city runs in the world, the 1750 miles taking four hours by Electra, but with the promise of jet aircraft within a couple of years. Then follows the Trans Australia Railway and an account of the difficulties of approaching WA by car, because the ‘somewhat euphemistically’ named Eyre Highway actually entailed 800 miles of gravel road. Ship travel came last, at exactly the time when air travel replaced ship travel in terms of passenger numbers arriving in Australia from overseas ports.²¹

Aborigines don’t make an appearance in Graham’s book until chapter 4, on the ‘The WA way of life, which is described as WAs ‘chief tourist attraction ‘ Perth, ‘one of the world’s loneliest cities’, has a ‘club-like social life’ dominated by the old pioneering families. While the mistrust of the rest of Australia might be ‘weakening’, Perth officialdom in its ‘predominantly English framework’, did mistrust ‘the kind of Commonwealth overlordship that creates artificial lakes at Canberra and refuses to extend the country water scheme in Western Australia’.²²

Graham’s “Way of Life” chapter examines the New Perth (Stephenson’s 1955 town plan), Politics for Gentlemen, The Right Suburbs (Peppermint Grove, Claremont, Nedlands), The Clubs, For Women Only, (from the politicians Dorothy Tangney and Agnes Robertson to ‘the outback tradition that wives are active helpers and not just social butterflies’). Then follows High Society and Big Business before we get to The Aborigines, the one ugly sore which you cannot fail to notice if you travel outside the metropolitan area’. Graham notes 8000 in the pastoral areas of the northwest and 10,000 ‘mixed-bloods’ in the agricultural areas from Geraldton southwards. The north west natives, working on stations, are ‘reasonably healthy because they are living in a familiar environment’ while the ‘mixed bloods...are increasing rapidly and could easily double their numbers in the next generation.’ Most of these lived in gazetted native reserves, ‘which whites cannot enter without a permit’, while ‘the rest exist in makeshift corrugated iron shelters or in tents’ Infant mortality is high, as is the crime rate, with most charges connected with liquor. In many reserves the native who has not been to gaol is a rarity’. While sympathetic to their plight, noting how few got to high school and how they still did not have voting rights, Graham, reflecting standard opinion of the day, concluded:

The irresponsible attitude of the natives themselves is the biggest barrier to their assimilation with the white community. Having no cultural traditions or standards akin to those of white society, they are feckless and irresponsible...²³

²⁰ Graham p.7

²¹ *Holiday Business*, chapter 9

²² Graham pp.54-55.

²³ Graham p.68

Graham's guidebook, like others in the Jacaranda series, is prose driven, with a handful of maps and only 20 black and white and coloured photographs. Most of these show scenery, wildflowers, mining, and yachting, but unusually for the time, included one photograph of a wooden, government-built cottage for natives at Narrogin.

The Australian coffee book fad that began in earnest with writer George Johnson and photographer Robert Goodman's *The Australians* in 1966²⁴ soon spawned many national and state imitators. These books, which relied heavily for their story line on photographic imagery, had none of the graphic content nor graphic design finesse of the books published by Oswald Zeigler from the late 1930s. But like Zeigler's *This is Australia*, revised many times in the 1950s and 1960s, the new books were big. Somehow a big continent needed big books. They became so numerous that when the local writer TAG Hungerford teamed up with photographer Richard Woldendorp, Hungerford admitted in his foreword that

everybody is writing books, articles and brochures about the Western Third, the Iron-ore State, the Sun-burned colossus, Pie-in-the-sky Land...[we] got into the queue...because we've both travelled all over the State many times since it began to stir out of its long slumber...²⁵

Their book, *A Million Square*, which appears to have been underwritten by the oil and mining industry, (although this is not explicitly stated), is geographically organised, with the final chapters plugging particular industrial concerns. It opens with an account of the Kimberley, 'a country of immense distances', 'where the mineral wealth of bauxite, iron, gold, tin, oil, has not yet been scratched'

Unlike the 1920 government book *Western Australia: Its early vicissitudes...* (referred to at the beginning of this article), Aborigines do not make an appearance until well into the volume. We learn about third generation Chinese residents running 'the dark little general store' in Wyndham and about 'polyglot' Broome, with its 'Australian-European-Chinese-Japanese-Malaysian-Indonesian racial pot pourri' before we are introduced to a flock of turkeys on the Roebuck Plains, being an 'easy mark' for sportsmen. The turkeys,

After existing on this continent for perhaps hundreds of thousands of years as companion and larder for the frugal black-man, they bid fair to join the dodo long before we wake up to the truth that we share the earth rather than own it.

With their flocks decimated, Hungerford wrote that for the remaining few turkeys 'every day is now spinning out for them the incredible thread of continuity they shared for so long with that other doomed flock, the Aborigines'. Hungerford's opening depiction of the 'doomed flock' has Aborigines walking up and down Broome's streets,

Peering in among the drinkers as if waiting for a friendly invitation to come in and exercise their right to breast the bar – the men sullen, the women in their long, fluttery, dirty-white dresses. ... They even laughed occasionally, although over what one would never know'.²⁶

²⁴ Rigby 1966, large format version. Later reissued in a cut-down format.

²⁵ *A Million Square: Western Australia*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1969, pp.159

²⁶ Hungerford and Woldendorp, p.12

Photographically, Aborigines first make their appearance in the twenty- third photograph in the book, a couple of pages before they appear in the text.. The caption does not mention the four Aborigines resting against Derby's 'talisman', a pot-bellied boab tree. By the time the text gets to Fitzroy crossing we see a photograph of an Aboriginal boy with his mother and sisters looking 'thoughtfully out on a world in which-somewhere- there must be a place for him'. The contrasting facing page shows an Aboriginal stockman, well attired in shirt and jeans, lying in front of a jukebox. The caption tells us that he is drifting 'back to his dreaming on waves of juke-box cowboy lament.'²⁷

Textual and photographic accounts of Western Australia from the 1920s to the 1960s reflect the gamut of government and popular attitudes. The tourist places appear straightforward and usually sanitised. The hardy perennials of WA tourism – the wildflowers, the bush, the sense of isolation – all get centre stage. The changes that have taken place in government promotional campaigns and tourism campaigns since then reflect changing patterns of tourism and a greater sophistication (though not always accompanied by greater frankness) in advertising and image-making

The sharp rise in public consciousness about indigenous Australians, which began in the led-up to the 1967 referendum and has continued over land rights, social conditions, the stolen generations and reconciliation, is increasingly reflected in tourism brochures. The scholarly interest displayed in the universities in the 1960s to 1980s has spilled over into tourism promotion. Indigenous tourism enterprises are now to be found in many parts of Australia. Eco-resorts, unheard of until the 1970s, are now commonplace. They are popular with backpackers and the 'grey power' travellers, retirees making their pilgrimages across the continent.

The promotional prose and imagery of Western Australia from the 1920s to the 1960s now appears, with hindsight, to be stagey and sanitised. But we need to contemplate this imagery to make sure that the marketing sophistication of this century doesn't just represent new forms of tourism hype.

²⁷ Hungerford and Woldendorp, pp.28-29