



[Home](#) › [Research](#) › [Papers and projects](#) › Superpit: Digging for uranium in the ...

Superpit: Digging for uranium in the Australian cultural imaginary

by [Adam Broinowski](#) in [Film](#), [Documents and artefacts](#), [Indigenous Collections](#), [Collection interpretation](#), [Television](#), 2,509 words

The mining industry has been a central force in shaping Australian history in the 20th century. In fact, as is evident in the policy switch from the 'Mining Super Profits Tax' (Rudd/Gillard government) to 'Open for Business' (Abbott government)¹, mining influence in Australian politics is direct and far-reaching. Any historical discussion of mining, however, should not overlook the historical relations between the Aboriginal owners and settler populations and their transnational partners.

Since 1768, when the British Crown charged Captain Cook to take possession as 'first discoverers' of the bounty to be had from the great southern continent, mineral wealth has been taken from this land by foreign powers.²

After destroying Aboriginal coastal settlements and driving their owners inland, European settlers followed up by sending livestock (cattle, sheep) outback, setting up



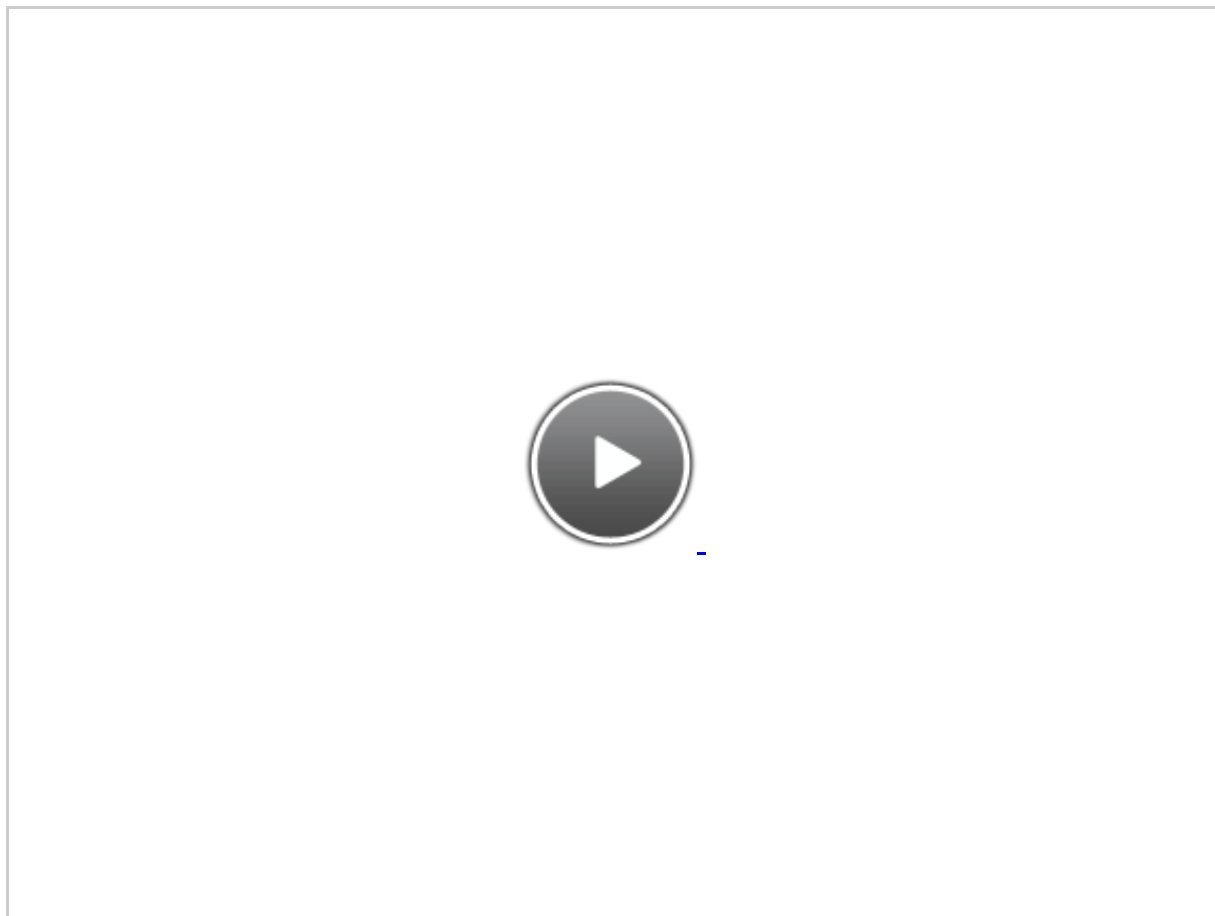
Miners in Mary Kathleen drilling for uranium, from *Walkabout* episode 7, Rum Jungle (1958).

Courtesy Ric Chauvel Carlsson [NFSA title: 32567](#)

consideration of their worldview or life ways beyond their utility to the settlers. This intensified when gold rush fever took hold.

In 1851 when gold was discovered in Victoria, there still was an element of magic to mining. Lone miners would fancy a spot, drop holes with pick and shovel, and chance their luck on a duffer or a strike. In exchange for hard work, it was thought the old earth would 'be good' and yield its secrets. Gold could improve a miner's station, educate his children, ward off sickness, and apparently lead to self-sufficiency. Yet the alluvial gold was soon mined out and individual miners had to fossick for overlooked spill. Large-scale mechanised deep mining operations funded by investors from the centres of capital (London, New York) moved in.

From Aboriginal perspectives, with communities now living on reserves and prohibited from accessing ceremonial lands and hunting grounds, rather than the elixir of life and the tool for emancipation, gold was the 'magnet and source of destruction' which had driven them into squalid conditions.



Munda Nyuringu (Robert Bropho and Jan Roberts, 1983)

[NFSA title: 54090](#)

Warning: May contain names, images and voices of deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

With coastal mining under the control of big business by the beginning of the 20th century, the promise of the 'dead heart' of central and northern Australia grew stronger in the settler imagination. Equated with 'Abraham of old', from the 1860s to the early 1900s, those 'lone, sun-browned' pioneers dreamed of mica mountains and gold reefs as they rode into the 'never never', and they earned an indelible place in the national narrative for their trouble (Burke and Wills, Lasseter, Stuart, Rev. John Flynn). The local Aborigines were indispensable to their missions and often saved their lives. Yet, because they were considered a 'primitive' or 'stone age' race with simple needs, they remained nameless.



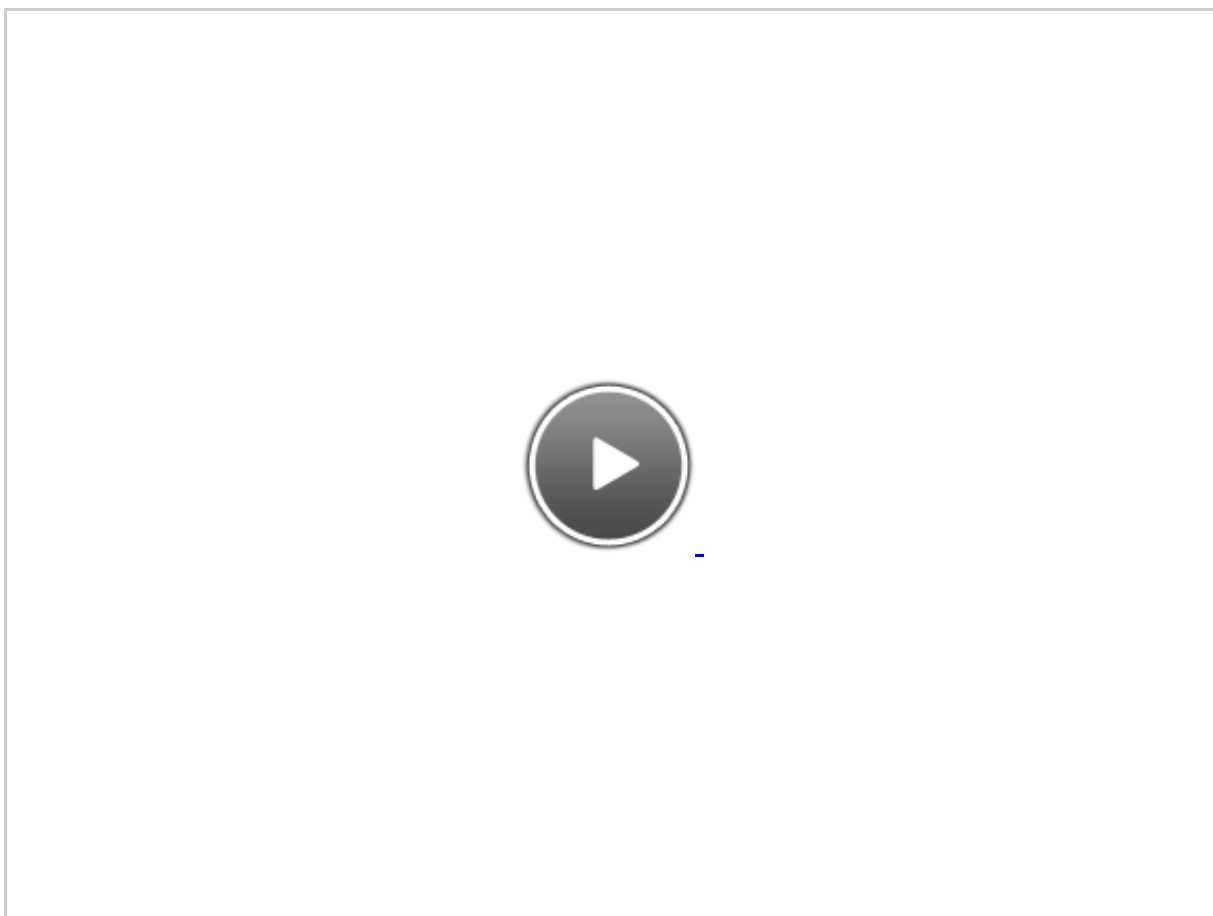
Phantom Gold (Rupert Kathner, 1937) [NFSA title: 10376](#)

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After the Stuart Highway from Alice Springs to Darwin was built as part of an industrial frontline in 1942 (also known as Uncle Tojo's track), the myth of the dead heart was broken. In the nation-building projects of the 1950s, the 'great inland wasteland' was deformed by the 'mineral exploration business' that boasted 100 years of exports. Aspirational migrants and city youths were attracted by the potential for a free and happy or thrilling future. Some of these mine sites even became tourist attractions.

But mining potential in the 1950s was about more than just economic boom. When Prime Minister Menzies committed Australia to a concentrated program of mining uranium, the 'super metal', the decision was based on the significant concerns of the government for a perceived threat in the Asian region. Weapons tests had already begun in 1949 after the Anglo-Australian Joint Project was established in 1946. Prince Philip came and 'left his mark in the SA desert' when he opened the Maralinga test site in 1954 (known as 'the Taranaki') to permit the British to 'shoot anything they liked', as the Minister for External Affairs, Richard Casey, put it in 1953. The site was part of the Woomera Range which was expanded from an initial 1,500 miles, to 270,000 kms by the 1980s, and was then scaled back to 127,000 kms by the 2000s (see a map of the Woomera Protected Area on the [Government of South Australia minerals website](#)).

As the poisonous modern rituals of atomic testing were carried out (Monte Bello Island, Emu Fields, Maralinga), which included the use of Plutonium 239, both Australian and British officials repeated that the health risks were negligible, despite extensive local radioactive contamination.⁴

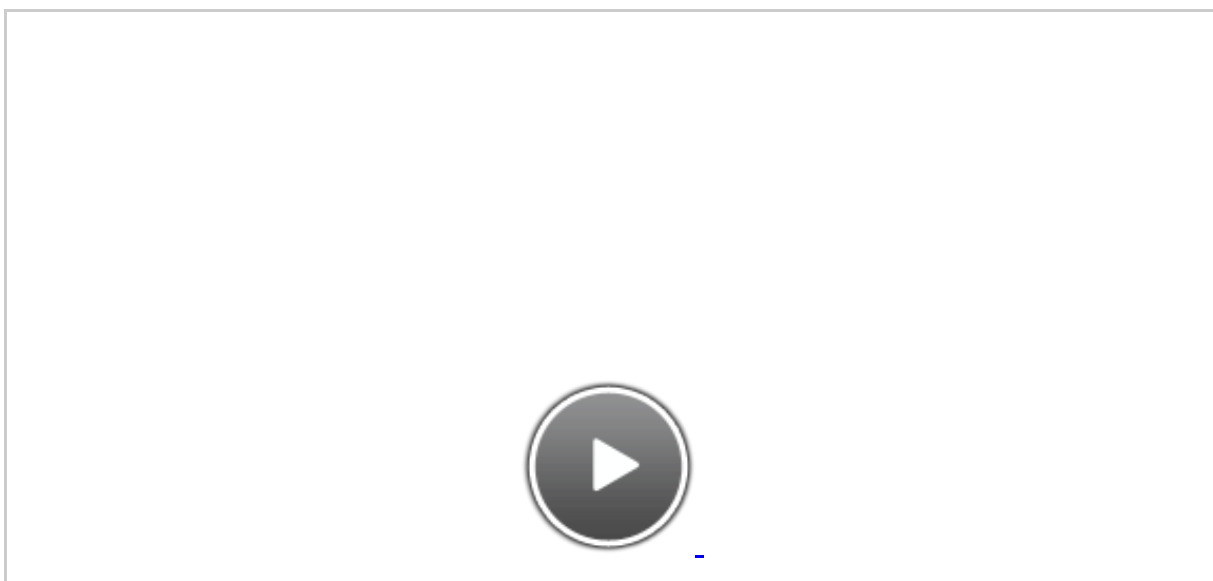


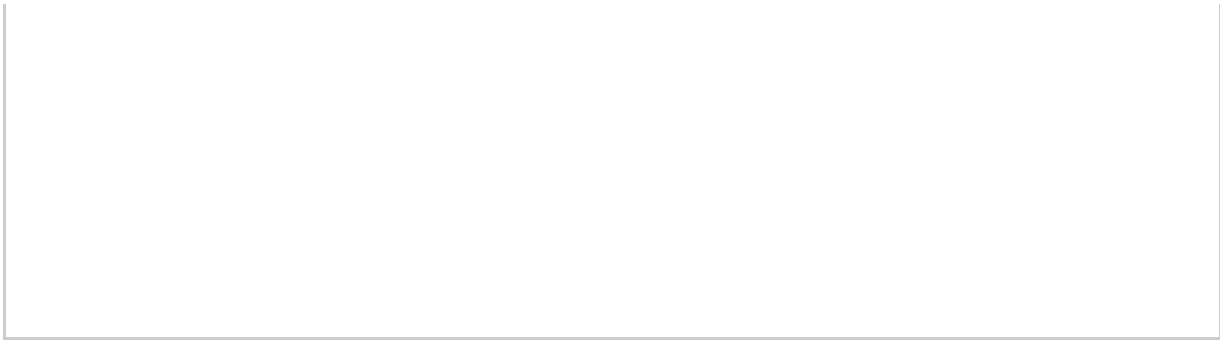
Backs to the Blast (Harry Bardwell, 1981)

[NFSA title: 40422](#)

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So while some Aboriginal people from Ooldea were moved from their traditional lands to Yalata prior to the 1956–57 series of tests at Maralinga, there were still Aboriginal people using their camping grounds that passed through the Maralinga test site. As found in the Royal Commission (1975), the insufficient caution taken to ensure that all people were removed from the Area prior to tests was based on the false and negligent assumption that there were no longer people living on this land. Members of the Pitjantjatjara, Yakunytjatjara, Tjarutja, and the Kupa Piti Kungka Tjuta nations are said to have been exposed to radioactive contamination, whether in ‘black mist’ or other forms. Along with many Australian atomic test veterans, they developed chronic illnesses, the complications from which led to many premature deaths.





Australian Atomic Confessions (Gregory Young, 2005)

[NFSA title: 1177392](#)

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These 'side effects' were largely ignored as officials prioritised the plans to make Australia a 'great power by 2000' (such as Philip Baxter, Chair of the Australian Atomic Energy Agency).⁵ When uranium finds at Rum Jungle and Mary Kathleen were published, transnational contracts flowed in and mining yellowcake 24/7 began in 1956.



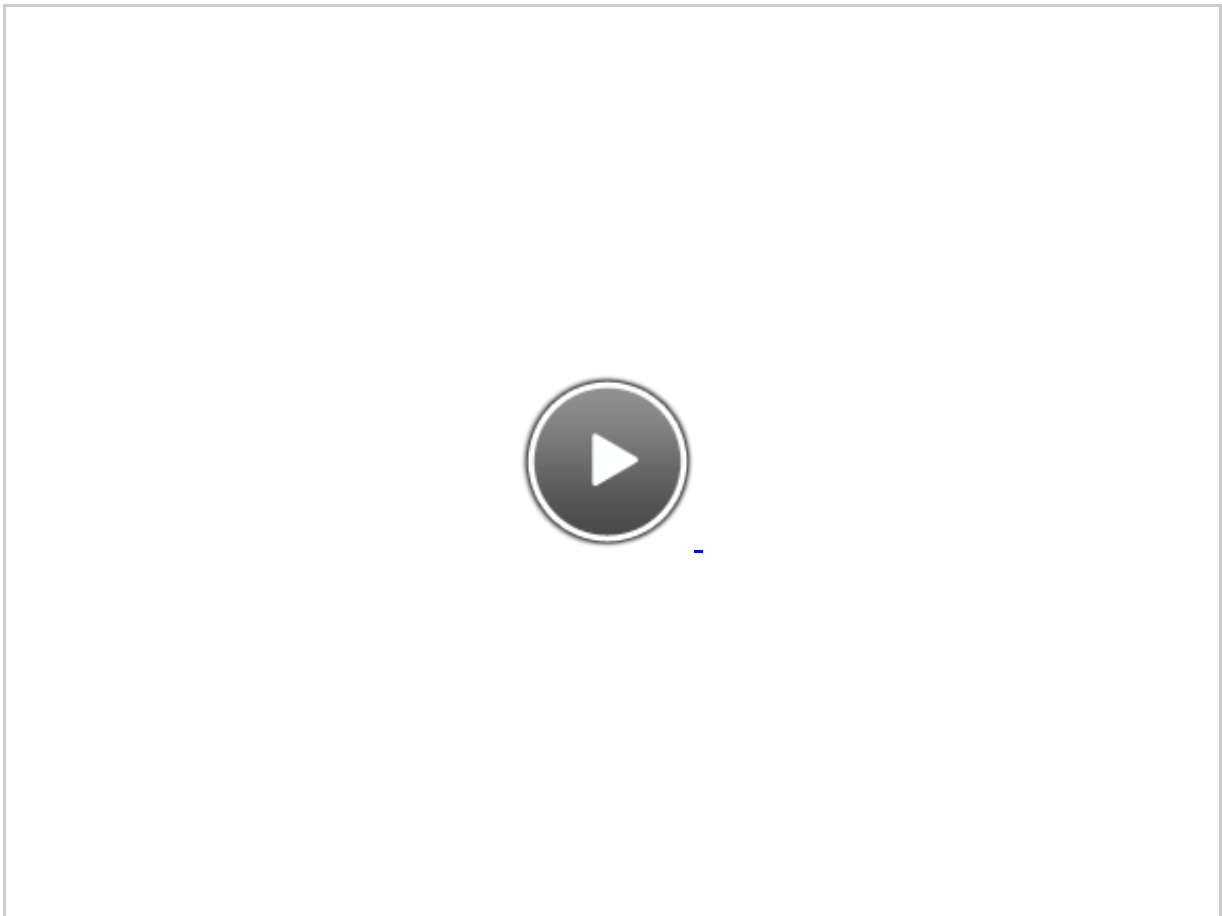
Parts of the Range, which includes the Maralinga Prohibited Area 400, are permanently contaminated (half-life of Plutonium 239 is 24,100 years, and stabilisation takes 250,000 years). It continues to be used for weapons and rocket testing as it is presently leased to contractors such as UK Defence and British Aerospace Engineering Systems. Plans are underway to open portions of the Area to mining.⁶

Consistent with the Atoms for Peace program rolled out in 1953-54 by the Eisenhower administration, assurances were often made to the public in Australia and the UK that nuclear power was, in fact, for civilian purposes, such as electricity production. This understanding can be seen in the celebrated documentary *Australian*

Sir Howard Morphy announces the Cozinc Rio Tinto takeover of Mary Kathleen mine. From *News Conference on Rio Tinto Takeover of Mary Kathleen Uranium Mine, Queensland* (c1954).

Walkabout, as part of a BBC television travel series focusing on Australia made by the iconic duo Charles and Elsa Chauvel.

Courtesy Wendy Gilbert [NFSA title: 57472](#)



Walkabout episode 7, 'Rum Jungle' (1958)

Courtesy Ric Chauvel Carlsson [NFSA title: 32567](#)

The Chauvels also went further north from Mary Kathleen, to the Alligator River, Arnhem Land, in the Top End. In a scene where Elsa handled a skull in a sacred burial cave, and interpreted its rock paintings, the Chauvels did not appear to be aware that the law to protect and regenerate country, as enfolded in the cultural stories of the Ngalakan people in this case, still held active meaning in the present. As the elder Bill Neidjie, from the Bunitj Association in Kakadu stated in 1990, Aboriginal law is as eternal as the earth: 'Ground, rock, cave don't move. It dream. It story. It law.'⁷

In Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, the rock escarpment is 2,000 million years old (pre-Cambrian). With the oldest recordings of human inhabitants in the world, there are countless burial grounds, and thousands of rock paintings. It has a UNESCO world heritage listing.



In 1977, when the bid to mine one of the largest uranium deposits in the world at Ranger 1 and Nabarlek in the middle of the park was approved by the Fraser government, the Fox Report warned that mining waste would have to be stored for a quarter of a million years. Aboriginal elders also warned that mining 'sickness country' would lead to disaster.⁸

With AUD \$2.8 billion profit expected from uranium exports from Ranger 1, and deposits at Ranger 3 even larger, the undertaking seemed non-negotiable and operations at Ranger began in 1981. The Mirarr community (Toby Gangale, Mirarr Senior Traditional Owner) was coerced into agreeing to this in exchange for

A Mine Called Olympic Dam (1990)

[NFSA title: 739898](#)

the promise of support through material benefits and community projects. It was decided to release steady and 'safe' amounts of 'low-level' radioactive waste from the Ranger tailings dam into the soil and the Magella river system.

In the early 1980s, Yirawala, a spiritual elder of the Gunwingu people in Arnhem Land, gave two options: 'either make laws to protect us and stop the uranium mine, or Bula will wake and let his waters flood the earth'. Buladjang, which means 'sickness country', marked the place where Bula, the Lightning spirit, ended his journey and lay down. 'Waking Bula' referred to releasing his power, which is cocooned in the earth, by mining. When the Jawoyn elders (Peter Jutbula, Sandy Baraway) divulged their knowledge of 'Bula's resting place' in their legal claim to the sacred site in Guratba (Coronation Hill) in Kakadu, they too warned that disrupting Bula would make the 'new world fall down'. 'You will lose your house in Darwin, big buildings, Canberra, overseas. He shake all around the place, even America ... This is sacred ground you must not work.'⁹

The claim was granted by Justice Donald Stewart, who stated in an interview that, 'It was a question of whether we fear the Jawoyn's god ... the apocalypse is [also] present in Revelations. It is not unique to the Aboriginal people ... whether it will happen, you don't know ... [we had to] weigh up in a rational way the benefits of a "hill of gold" against an "apocalyptic religion".'¹⁰

This logic did not carry to the main proponents of uranium mining. With regard to the proposal to mine Jabiluka 1, the positions of pro-mining representatives from government, transnational corporations, and certain Aboriginal groups can be summarised in four key points:

1. Water would be monitored and there would no health effects outside the property of the mine (Jabiluka).
2. The impact would be minimal and damaged land would be rehabilitated.
3. There is a moral responsibility to supply the world's energy needs and support our lifestyle.
4. Mining helps Aboriginal business and self-management and is more effective as a form of reconciliation.¹¹

During this conflict, Yvonne Margarula (Mirarr traditional owner) and Jacqui Katona (Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation) identified the primary problem as existing between evaluations of material wealth by the settler culture and cultural life by the Mirarr. The Mirarr people claimed that their will and their right to determine what happens to their country was never respected by the government during the process of making the decision to mine.

When the Howard government lifted Australia's 'three mine' policy in 1996, the Mirarr vehemently opposed the plans of Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) to develop the 3 Deeps mine at Jabiluka. This was supported by more than 5,000 activists in the Jabiluka blockade which brought international attention to the issue.

These warnings were finally confirmed when 1.4 million litres of acidic radioactive slurry leaked at the Ranger mine in December 2013.

The lack of reciprocity in Aboriginal-settler relations has stunted public understanding of the meaning and value in Aboriginal cultures. Beyond the frames that limit the perceived value of the land within settler concerns, one case of the successful protection of the commons from mining encroachments is Jeffrey Lee, the Djok park ranger of Koongarah in western Arnhem Land. Lee rejected 'billions of dollars' from energy corporations to protect his 'cultural land'.

Another is the recent court victory of seven Aboriginal clans who rejected the proposal of a nuclear waste dump at Muckaty Station in June 2014. The refusal by these people to abandon their responsibilities to care for country, and their capacity to regenerate social meaning by de-centering the economy as the central driver of history, is exemplary.

Given the ongoing damage caused by the Fukushima nuclear disaster since 11 March 2011, with the Fukushima Daiichi reactor said to have been fuelled by Australian uranium (at least in part), one wonders how many more warnings the authorities and their transnational partners need. The image in *Phantom Gold* of a lone European settler in the desert who hunts for gold while dying from thirst, may indeed come back to haunt us.



Phantom Gold (Rupert Kathner, 1937) [NFSA title: 10376](#)

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- ¹See Back, Alexandra 2014, 'Tony Abbott raises eyebrows after linking WWII D-Day memorial with policies on mining and carbon taxes', [Brisbane Times](#), 2 June.
<http://www.stockandland.com.au/news/metro/national/general/tony-abbott-raises-eyebrows-after-linking-wwii-dday-memorial-with-policies-on-mining-and-carbon-taxes/2700563.aspx>
- ²'Secret Instructions, Cook's voyage 1768–1771: Copies of Correspondence, etc. 1768–1771', National Library of Australia MS 2. Accessed September 2013 from, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms2-s56-e-cd>.
- ³In 1881–1903 after gold was discovered in Falls Creek, Kalgoorlie, Gympie Hill, Burra, populations in Western Australia rose dramatically and gold was making up 80 per cent of WA exports. The goldfield towns included Menzies, Laverton, Kalgoorlie and Leonora. Aboriginal people were forced to work, were hunted down if they escaped, and could be charged for trespassing if they left the reserve to go walkabout or for ceremony. Their mixed-race children became wards of the state who learned to run and hide when they saw a white horse. Even in 1978, no Aboriginal person could invite any non-Aboriginal person onto Aboriginal reserves in Western Australia. Roberts, Janine 1978, *From Massacres to Mining: The colonization of Aboriginal Australia*, CIMRA and War on Want, London.
- ⁴See also Tynan, Liz 2013, 'Dig for secrets: the lesson of Maralinga's Vixen B', *The Conversation*, 26 July 2013.
- ⁵Reynolds, Wayne 2000, *Australia's bid for the atomic bomb*, Melbourne University Press, Victoria; *Fortress*

Australia (Peter Butt, 2001), [NFSA: 507758](#).

⁶The APY and MT peoples have applied to have the prohibition lifted so as to prevent (non-nuclear) rocket and surveillance tests continuing on their land. 'Interview with Andrew Collett' 2013, [The Anangu Lands Paper Tracker](#), recorded 17 June 2013, <http://www.papertracker.com.au/radio/interview-with-andrew-collett/>.

⁷*Black Australia* (Darrell Sibosado and Michael Brogan, 1990), [NFSA: 239897](#).

⁸The Fox Report also recommended that the Traditional Owners' decision not to permit the mine not be recognised. See: *Impact of Mining: Alligator Rivers Region, Kakadu National Park* (David Roberts, 1981), [NFSA: 43668](#) ; *Jabiluka* (David Bradbury, 1997), [NFSA: 333811](#) ; *Land of the Apocalypse* (Ruth Berry and Robert Plasto-Lehner, 1991), [NFSA: 682154](#) ; *Dirt Cheap* (David Hay, 1980), [NFSA: 2325](#) ; *Walking Through a Minefield* (Cathy Henkel, 1999), [NFSA: 416592](#) ; *Walya Ngamardiki: The Land My Mother* (David Roberts, 1978), [NFSA: 381355](#) ; *Yirawala, The Picasso of Arnhem Land* (Sandra Le Brun Holmes, 1982), [NFSA: 808283](#) ; *Red: Land and Politics* (Darrell Sibosado and Michael Brogan, 1989), [NFSA: 241410](#).

⁹*Land of the Apocalypse* (Ruth Berry and Robert Plasto-Lehner, 1991), [NFSA: 682154](#).

¹⁰*Land of the Apocalypse* (Ruth Berry and Robert Plasto-Lehner, 1991), [NFSA: 682154](#).

¹¹These are the more commonly repeated justifications, among others. *Impact of Mining: Alligator Rivers Region, Kakadu National Park* (David Roberts, 1981), [NFSA: 43668](#) ; *Land of the Apocalypse* (Ruth Berry and Robert Plasto-Lehner, 1991), [NFSA: 682154](#) ; *Walking Through a Minefield* (Cathy Henkel, 1999), [NFSA: 416592](#).

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