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## On the Trail of a Ghost

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## On the Trail of a Ghost

Nicole Hodgson (Murdoch University)

I am on the trail of a ghost, the ghost of Miss Sarah Brooks, who died almost one hundred years ago. I first heard the bare bones of her story a decade ago from a friend, Marcus, who flew me and my husband in a light plane from Esperance, on the south-east coast of Western Australia, out to Israelite Bay. This evocative biblical name is embedded in the memories of most of us west of the Nullarbor after a lifetime of weather reports on crackly ABC local radio. *A gale force warning is in place for Albany to Israelite Bay.*

Marcus flew his plane low for the 150km out of Esperance, skirting the quietly dramatic coastline, where low-slung, grey-green folds of land meet rounded and weathered granite monoliths, which, in turn, meet startlingly white beaches that blend into the shimmering turquoise water. The granite islands of the Recherche Archipelago are scattered across the deep ocean of the most resonant blue. I remember a perfectly clear day in an immense arc of sky and the rare vulnerability of flying in a light plane. The colours were luminous and the visible signs of humans imperceptible. Marcus told us stories of the earliest settlers, including Sarah Brooks, who came out into this country in the 1870s. Even from a vantage point one thousand feet above, this looked like the 'strange and difficult country' described by 1840s cross-continental explorer, Edward John Eyre.

We landed next to the ruins of the Israelite Bay Telegraph Station, a repeater station on the East-West telegraph line that linked Western Australia to the rest of the country. The thick limestone walls and tall chimneys are the substantial remains of what was once a grand Victorian building. It now stands forlorn and incongruous on a flat windswept salt pan at least one hundred kilometres from any human settlements. Sarah Brooks spent the majority of her life either in the tiny settlement that developed around the Telegraph Station at Israelite Bay, or on a pastoral station, Balbinia, in the dry eucalypt woodland fifty kilometres to the north.

Sarah was an educated, accomplished woman of twenty-four when, in 1874, she left Albany with her mother, Emily, and brother, John. They walked those hundreds of

miles with just one horse and cart carrying their possessions. Their intention was to establish a pastoral station and restore their family fortunes. The government of the time was offering generous leases to encourage the settlement of the country out east that had until then been largely ignored. For good reason, as it turned out.

Sarah never married. She worked for a time as a telegraphist, relaying the Morse code messages that linked Western Australia to the rest of the country, and Australia to the world. More famously, she became a prolific botanical collector for Baron von Mueller from the distant Victorian Botanic Garden. Sarah Brooks is part of a lineage of women botanical collectors and illustrators in Western Australia that began with Georgiana Molloy's collecting from Augusta and the Capes region in the 1830s, and continues through the botanical illustrators Georgiana Leake, Emily Pelloe, and the celebrated contemporary botanical artist, Philippa Nikulinsky (Ryan 2012).

There is so much that intrigues me about the life of Sarah Brooks, but at the heart of my fascination is my attempt to understand how an intelligent single woman managed to live for fifty years in close to abject poverty, in the most remote part of South Western Australia, with her sanity apparently intact. From the limited evidence available - a single newspaper interview in *The Sunday Times* (Canberra 1928), a letter to the *Western Mail* on 'Aboriginal Customs' (Pioneer 1906), an article published in a German geographical magazine detailing the exploration she and John made to Mt. Ragged (Brooks 1888), and the physical evidence of her significant botanical collecting in the collection of the Victorian Botanic Garden (Maroske and Vaughan 2014) - I imagine that she found a connection to place, to the flora, and to the Noongar and Ngadju people that was unusual for her time. I feel it was the depth of this connection that allowed her to make a life there, in what seems an inhospitable and difficult place.

I call Sarah Brooks a ghost, but, really, I am the one haunting her. To follow her trail, I need to leave my home in the small town of Denmark in Western Australia. On the south coast, the wilds loom close. The southerly wind that follows a storm is a crisp, cold reminder that there is nothing but the deep blue of the tumultuous Southern Ocean between here and Antarctica. On land, Denmark is at the boundary of two bioregions. We look west to the small pocket of tall, wet, eucalypt forest comprising mostly karri trees and two species of tingle trees, all of which are endemic to South West

Australia. To the east, the rainfall gradually decreases and the size of the trees with it. The jarrah forest and banksia woodland shrinks to the heathland and salt lakes around Israelite Bay and the Cape Arid National Park. From here the Nullarbor Plain is not far to the east.

The landscape in which Sarah Brooks lived out her life is ancient and desiccated, sparsely populated and remote even now. It was not named Cap Arride by the French for nothing. This big stretch of flat, ground-down country can feel eerily empty and preternaturally still. It must have felt particularly so for the Brooks family in 1874, as some of the first Europeans to attempt to make a life there. But, of course, the land was already inhabited by the Noongar and Ngadju, who had created a successful, sustainable culture amongst these harsh conditions for at least 40,000 years.

Ecologically, Israelite Bay is an inflection point; where the kwongan<sup>1</sup>, the low, sandy heathland of the Southwest Australian Floristic Region, gives way to the arid and treeless limestone plains of the Nullarbor bioregion, and the extraordinarily diverse eucalypt woodlands of the Great Western Woodlands to the north.

Superimposing a map of bioregions onto a map of Aboriginal tribal boundaries demonstrates just how intimately cultural practice was tied to the ecological. And so it is here at Israelite Bay, the south-eastern limit of the Southwest Australian Floristic Region. It is also the eastern border of the Noongar nation of south-west Australia. To the east, along the Eucla coast of the Nullarbor plain is Mirning country, and to the north in the Great Western Woodlands is Ngadju country. The name Israelite Bay is said to have come from early explorers, possibly the Dempster brothers, who noticed that the Aboriginal men they met there were circumcised, unlike the Noongars to the west, and they linked the practice to an ancient form of Judaism.

The European settlers in the vast area between Esperance and the Eucla district on the Nullarbor were never numerous. Before beginning the research, I had naively hoped that the disputes between the Traditional Owners and the Europeans over land and resources might therefore have been less violent here than in the more settled areas. The documentary record shows otherwise. A pair of settlers at Eucla, out on the

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah's brother, John Brooke (sic), recorded the name 'quoweken' as the Aboriginal word for sand plain, or 'open plain without timber,' in a letter to Baron von Mueller in 1896, which was subsequently presented to the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science (Brooke 1896).

Nullarbor - Kennedy and McGill - were particularly brutal, with stories of them distributing poisoned flour, poisoning waterholes and shooting into sleeping camps of Mirning people. I was reassured to read, in an account by Arthur Dimer, a Ngadju man of the area, that Sarah's brother, John Brooks, was 'known by his contemporaries among the Ngadju as a humane man who distributed rations fairly and who did not resort to the gun during the early years of settlement to try to prevent the theft of stock by Aboriginal people' (Gifford 2002).

Sarah Brooks' apparently nuanced understanding of Aboriginal people, at least for her time, is one of the most intriguing aspects of her character. In a letter to the *Western Mail* (*Pioneer* 1906) detailing Aboriginal customs of the area and written in response to a column by Daisy Bates, she writes:

With regard to such theories as that the Australian aborigines are the direct descendants of Palaeolithic man, we ought to remember the dictum of Professor Rhys, about the ineradicable tendency of mankind to do the same things under the same circumstances. The most civilised man wrecked on this coast, before white settlement, if he were to get a living at all would have to revert to the stone age ...

Twenty years later, in a newspaper interview with the *Sunday Times* (Canberra 1928) towards the end of her life, Sarah began with the explanation of how they came to be at Balbinia and Israelite Bay, and included what I interpret as an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of the Traditional Owners:

Towards the close of the year 1873, a series of articles appeared in the 'Argus' setting out particulars of very liberal land acts in Western Australia, then a Crown Colony. It was stated that settlers would receive a free lease of 100,000 acres for five years, with one year free of charges to travel to any blocks they may select, from which it would appear that such blocks were far from the 'busy haunts of men,' as indeed they proved to be.

Nay more, we soon found the Government had been very liberal with something which did not belong to it. Old Noah, Old Friday and other leaders of the more ancient race were the real owners whose race had lived in undisputed possession and were not inclined to waive their rights to anyone. We were warned too, that the country was poor, and patchy, but we thought

no matter how poor, 100,000 acres would surely carry 5,000 sheep and that would give us a start.

It was surprising to find that her extensive botanical collecting was not mentioned in this article. However, she does demonstrate her ongoing fascination with everything botanical.

Coming back to civilisation after 50 years, I was frequently asked what struck me most and always I replied, the beauty of the flowers. We first met them along the railway as we approached Perth, the lovely blue lace flowers and the gorgeous orange plumes of the Christmas trees. The tiny red-roofed cottages had magnificent gladioli of three or four colours adorning gardens often only a few yards in area, also carnations, roses and delphinium. Evidently the women cared for them. As I have been trying to grow these flowers under unfavourable circumstances, I know what their difficulties must have been.

Originally, I haunted the ghost of Sarah Brooks with the intention of writing a non-fiction account of her life, but the lack of any other original source material in Sarah's own voice led me to fictionalise her story in a work-in-progress. The unexpected revelation and gift of attempting to inhabit the experience of a twenty-four-year-old woman walking across this country in 1874 has been a far deeper and intimate understanding of this land. In trying to recreate in my imagination the landscape she walked through, I am gleaning fresh insight into the dramatic changes we have wrought.

I've been an environmentalist since I was a teenager, but I realise now that my early interest was social and political, and somewhat disconnected from the physical realities of the natural world. I'd spent time as a child living outside cities because our family loved to camp, and I had always felt an affinity with the bush. I was certain I would eventually live outside the city. But still, my young passion for the natural world was more of an all-encompassing embrace of the wonder and beauty, and a sadness and anger at the ongoing destruction. Meeting my scientifically-inclined husband helped me to see and truly appreciate the detail. He is the kind of person who remembers all the Latin botanical names for plants and who has scientific understandings I lack. Even with his help, I am a slow burner as a naturalist, but my appreciation for the intricacies of the natural world is ever expanding.

In spring of 2016, or Djilba in the Noongar calendar, we hit the road, me and my scientific husband, with our camper trailer, and followed the trail of the Brooks family towards Israelite Bay. This route took us firstly through the southern edge of the Wheatbelt, the broadacre agricultural region that sweeps in a wide arc around Perth, an area the size of Britain. Like agricultural areas everywhere, it has been all but denuded of the original vegetation. At this time of year the paddocks are an unearthly vibrant green not found naturally in the Western Australian landscape, where the vegetation is muted and greyed. These vivid colours are only possible because of the widespread application of superphosphate, and a reminder that agriculture in Western Australia did not flourish until phosphate was commercially available on a large scale. These ancient weathered soils have such very low levels of nutrients.

Thin lines of paddock trees stand in silhouette against the sky, remnants of the eucalypt woodlands that once covered this land. Most melancholy of all are the solo orphaned trees; stark and skeletal in the middle of a paddock, standing guard over a monoculture. Trees, like most living things, weren't designed to be isolated and unconnected from their kin and their community. In the *Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben (2016) describes trees as very social beings that share food with their own species, and sometimes even nourish their competitors. But out in the Wheatbelt even tragic lone paddock trees are now at risk. The newest massively oversized farm machinery that runs remotely can't navigate around paddock trees so down they must come. The mantra for farmers in most of the Western Australian wheatbelt is *get big or get out*.

This dramatic change in our landscape, the loss of vegetation on such a grand scale, is so visually arresting and obviously recognisable. In imagining the journey Sarah Brooks and her family took, I've been attempting, with some difficulty, to mentally patch the vegetation back onto the landscape in front of me.

The more subtle changes we have wrought here take longer to emerge. We stopped at a tiny reserve, a small rectangular island surrounded by the flat expanse of paddocks. We walk through a patch of eucalypt woodland, the likes of which would have covered the entire landscape in 1874. Head high thin limbed trees with sparse canopies are interspersed throughout the scratchy thorny undergrowth. Many of the trunks and stems of shrubs and small trees are grey when alive, then continue to

weather and harden to a light brittle grey after they fall on the ground. This wood is so hard, presumably after a lifetime of moisture deprivation, that it does not break down easily. Branches rot from the inside, leaving behind a delicately patterned exoskeleton of grey woody whorls.

We wander through the woodland in search of the discreet wildflowers and delicate orchids that transform what can initially appear to be a drab landscape. Even after a wet winter, the ground crunches with a cracking crispness; leaves, twigs, branches. In trying to imagine myself there 140 years ago, I think about my steps crunching and cracking across the ground. Then I remember the research on the ecological impact of the loss of small marsupials from Australian landscapes (Platt 2013). The many small digging mammals were constantly turning over soil and leaf litter into the soil, both increasing soil fertility and reducing the leaf and branch litter. Meaning presumably that for a woman walking through it in 1874, the ground didn't crunch and crackle in quite the same way.

It strikes me that this is just one of the dramatic changes to the landscape with which I am slightly familiar. What I don't know enough about are the changes to the invertebrate populations. Or different species of birds. Or soil microbes and fungi. The impacts of fertiliser run off, pesticide and herbicide drift. The introduced species and rapid spread of weeds. Ongoing impacts of climate change, changing rainfall patterns and changing fire regimes. I certainly do not know enough about what might be the unforeseen outcomes of the interactions of all of these forces in a complex ecological system.

The European settlement of Australia is a tragic marvel in terms of the scale of impact in such a dramatically short space of time, especially in Western Australia. There is something about this side of the country that feels especially ancient and, at times, unapproachable.

Back on the road we continue to follow the trail of the Brooks family. They were originally bound for Esperance Bay, but all the good grazing land was already claimed by the Dempster brothers. Further and further east they pushed, until settling for a few years at Point Malcolm, just to the west of Israelite Bay. We camped at Point Malcolm



for a week. A negligible distance on the map equated to a slow journey on a treacherous track pockmarked with wide puddles and occasional quagmires.

Point Malcolm is another ecological inflection point. It is a low weathered granite promontory where the ocean swamps the rock in high tides and big swells, leaving behind perfectly clear rock pools full of crustaceans and insect larvae and fine algae. To the west the ocean is deep and rugged, and waves crash relentlessly onto the white sandy beach. The roar of the ocean is the underlying soundtrack to our stay. East of Point Malcolm is the start of the flat, shallow waters of the Great Australian Bight. On this side, enormous drifts of seagrass lie on the beach, piled over half a metre high, drawing shorebirds and gulls to pick over the insects and rotting weed.

Inland, back from the coastal dunes, back where the vastness of geological time and the many millennia of storms, wind and rain have flattened the land to a broad sandy plain that barely undulates as far as the eye can see. Out there, away from the dynamic energy of the ocean, in the most unprepossessing of circumstances, are the immense botanical riches of kwongan vegetation in the Southeast Coastal Province of Southwest Australia's Floristic Region, the most species rich area of this global biodiversity hotspot (Hopper and Gioia 2004).

This landscape is difficult for me to grasp. I've never been able to take even a half decent photo of it, as though it resists my attempts to capture it. Sarah Brooks was a painter, and I imagine the landscape also resisted her attempts to render it in a conventional painterly view. I imagine her turning her artist's eye to the ground, to the delicate details in the vegetation as a way of coming to grips with it. While she wasn't necessarily known as a botanical artist, I imagine that amongst her lost personal effects were many botanical drawings and paintings. Ryan (2012) describes the works of botanical illustrators Leake, Pelloe and Nikulinsky as 'art in dialogue with science', and Sarah Brooks demonstrates this same inter-relationship. On her grave in Norseman cemetery, a small plaque commemorates her as a painter and botanist.

When we drive back out from our coastal campsite at Point Malcolm a week later, many more plants are in flower. Every time we stop and step out of the car into the ankle-high, thorny, scratchy, kwongan vegetation, there are at least half a dozen different flowering plants compared to the previous stop. I see one plant that defies logic. No higher than two centimetres; a tiny, grey stick with perhaps a dozen hard,

needle-like leaves. But it supports a drooping, bell-shaped flower three quarters of the size of the whole plant and a strident, fiery red. I have to get down on the ground, as close as I can, to make sure the flower hasn't fallen onto the miniature plant by mistake.

I stand up and say to my husband, 'Surrounded by all of this, how could Sarah Brooks not become a botanist?'

There are at least 930 specimens known to have been collected by Sarah Brooks (Maroske and Vaughan 2014). Baron von Mueller acknowledged her contribution by naming two species after her; *Scaevola brookeana* and *Hakea brookeana*. She also collected seaweeds and algae, and had a species of red algae, *Rhodophylla*, named after her. Such a prolific collector must have been extremely valuable to von Mueller. In the latter stage of his life, he was determined to compile a census of Australian plants, and like all botanists, he recognised the incredible diversity and high levels of endemism in Western Australian flora. Even such a prolific collector as Sarah Brooks would have barely begun to uncover the full diversity of species in this district.

In human, let alone geological timescales, this land has only just been discovered by Europeans, and the scientific understanding of it is equally as young. New species are still regularly discovered here, and the levels of endemism and concentrations of species richness that exist here delight and confound biologists. Professor Stephen Hopper, who spent six years as the Director of the Kew Gardens in London, has come back to southwestern Australia to live in Albany, and says 'To a biologist like me, this place is the nearest thing to heaven on earth' (Green Skills 2014). I imagine the ghost of Sarah Brooks nodding in approval.

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