

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications -- Department of English

English, Department of

---

2007

## Literature in the Arid Zone

Thomas Lynch

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, tlynch2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

Lynch, Thomas, "Literature in the Arid Zone" (2007). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 82.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/82>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE LITTORAL ZONE  
AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS  
AND THEIR WRITERS

Introduced and edited by  
CA. Cranston and Robert Zeller



Amsterdam - New York, NY 2007



Australian Deserts

# Literature in the Arid Zone

Tom Lynch

**Abstract:** This chapter surveys and assesses from an ecocentric perspective some representative literary portrayals of the Australian deserts. Generally, it contrasts works that portray the desert as an alien, hostile, and undifferentiated void with works that recognise and value the biological particularities of specific desert places. It explores the literature of three dominant cultural orientations to the deserts: pastoralism, mining, and traversal. It concludes with a consideration of several multi-voiced and/or multi-genred bioregionally informed works that suggest fruitful directions for more ecocentric literary approaches.

[...] in European imaginations deserts = fear; in an Australian imagination it could be different.

Susan Hawthorne (qtd. in Bartlett 1998: 119)

## 1. Desert Places

Australia is the world's driest inhabited continent, with regions definable as deserts making up roughly 70% of the total landmass. Arid Australia contains nine popularly recognised and distinct deserts: The Nullarbor Plain, and the Great Victoria, Gibson, Great Sandy, Tanami, Simpson, Sturt Stony, Tirari, and Strzelecki Deserts (Ellis 1998: 9-15). However, in its 'Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation for Australia', Environment Australia 2000 identifies roughly 30 distinct bioregions within the arid zone (2000). Whichever divisions one chooses to recognise, works of most interest from an ecocritical point of view understand that deserts differ from one another in important ways. Unfortunately, authors and scholars of desert writing have not always found such distinctions important.

---

Much writing set in the deserts, especially fiction, portrays the desert as a more-or-less undifferentiated blankness, a threatening otherness that challenges all notions of normality. Gaile McGregor, for instance, remarks that "In novel after novel, the aspect emphasised in descriptions of the land, quite apart from any specific features that might be invoked, is its alienness" (McGregor 1994: 13). Many descriptions of the Australian deserts continue to portray them in the bleakest of terms. Numerous explanations can account for such a phenomenon. Of particular interest to ecocritics, I think, because of its wedding of language and landscape, is the lexical explanation formulated by J.M. Arthur in which the English language itself is implicated in the widespread Australian inability to see the deserts on their own terms, and hence the subsequent disdain and fear that is frequently expressed for desert places. As Arthur documents, the English language, which evolved on a small, wet, foggy island, is poorly suited for rendering the landscapes of Australia, especially the large, dry, clear landscapes of the desert (Arthur 2003: 26). When the English language is used to describe Australia's landscapes, especially arid landscapes, those lands will always seem to be flawed and deficient, more notable for what is absent than for what is present. (Even the word *desert* has this flaw.)

In the discussion that follows I will focus on three particular orientations to the arid zone: pastoralism, mining, and the traversal. I conclude with a consideration of several multi-voiced bioregional projects.

## 2. Pastoralism

As they have done nearly everywhere they have gone, English-speaking settlers to the Australian deserts introduced a pastoral culture based on the herding of cattle and sheep. Quite a few novels exist dealing with the transformation of wild desert landscapes into pastoral settlements.<sup>1</sup> Because of the ambiguous legacy of pastoralism, its undeniable drama and heroism mixed with its imperial heritage and ecological destructiveness, the most astute novels evince ambiguity and discontent about the pastoralising process. Olaf Ruhen's parable of pastoralism, *Naked under Capricorn* (1957), is an especially rich text in this regard. Most of the action takes place in the country of the

---

Eiluwarra people,<sup>2</sup> which (if we can assume this is a variant spelling of Iliaura or Alyawarre) allows us to locate the story in the Hart or Jervois Ranges northeast of Alice Springs, in the Tanami Desert and Burt Plain bioregions.

The novel portrays the desert not as an undifferentiated void but as an ecologically rich area. In fact an important theme concerns the growing ability of the main character, Davis Marriner, to read and understand the landscape, and hence to sympathise with it and with its native inhabitants when the land is degraded as the tragedy of pastoralism unfolds. In this way Ruhen implies that ecological ignorance serves the imperial project as it enables one to ignore the degradation caused by one's endeavours.

By the end of *Naked under Capricorn*, Marriner has prospered, discarded his Aboriginal wife, and married a white woman from the coast who has brought her notions of domesticity and landscape aesthetics with her. Instead of his original shack, Marriner now lives in a "painted homestead, set in its burgeoning gardens". However this home, of which Marriner feels he ought to be proud, instead seems to him "unbelievably out of place" (Ruhen 1957: 191). "The house was a picture; its lawns green and forever cool from the sprinkled water, its boundaries marked with groves of flowering trees, its verandahs cool and restful" (p. 192). Rather than revelling in the triumph of his imperial project, however, Marriner perversely prefers "the scattered collection of native humpies" (p. 192).

A thriving genre of pastoral literature in the deserts is the station-wife or station-daughter memoir.<sup>3</sup> In works of this sort, the desert is portrayed as a decidedly ambiguous sort of home; indeed the desert is often not so much a home as it is what must be overcome in order to create a home. Myrtle Rose White published several accounts of life on the various stations that her husband, referred to always as 'the Boss', was hired to manage: *No Roads Go By* (1932), *Beyond the Western Rivers* (1955), and *From that day to This* (1961). These books are set in the Broken Hill Complex and the Simpson-Strzelecki Dunefields bioregions northwest of Broken Hill. While White attempts to make these various stations homey for the Boss, the properties do not belong to them, and their tenure there is in the control of others. White reveals great affection for these remote stations, but she does not remain on them. The desert is a place of sojourn, but

---

not a home. In White's work, people of the arid Outback are invariably friendly, resourceful folk always willing to help a neighbour, and even a stranger, in trouble. For the most part, however, the desert itself is portrayed as a bleak place judged almost entirely on the basis of its suitability for pastoral success.

The American writer Wallace Stegner has famously argued that before Americans can live comfortably and responsibly in the American West, they will need to "get over the colour green" (Stegner 1992: 54). As we have seen in Ruhen's *Naked under Capricorn*, a similar situation exists in Australia, where promoting the colour green in the desert is part of the colonial process and is often perceived as a particularly female response to the desert. Like the character of Marriner's wife in *Naked under Capricorn*, White never gets over the colour green. She has, she asserts, "a passionate love for green", and finds it difficult to be "faced with unclothed red sandhills for months and years on end" (White 1932: 87). In the process of 'beautifying' her homestead at Noonameena she installs both vegetable and flower gardens, "two large lawns", and a large variety of other imported shrubs and trees. The first year these plantings prosper, but by the end of the third year they have nearly all died and blown away (p. 70).

Another work in the station-wife genre is Marie Mahood's *Icing on the Damper* (1995), which focuses mainly on her time at Mongrel Downs in the Tanami Desert bioregion northwest of Alice Springs. Like White's books, Mahood's is a tribute to her husband Joe, who is portrayed throughout as the epitome of the competent Outback stockman, fully at home in the arid landscape. In contrast, Mahood, like White, portrays herself as a willing but slightly unsettled resident of the remote arid regions. For example, she describes her feelings during the family's move from Alice Springs to Mongrel Downs:

Joe pointed out landmarks to us and it was easy to see that he was completely at home in that land of red sand, grey mulga scrub and huge anthills, where the horizon seemed to stretch to infinity. To me, its very vastness was awe-inspiring and a little frightening. (Mahood 1995: 78)

Joe Mahood is not only a competent Outback stockman but, contrary to the stereotype of the ignorant Outback yokel, is also a talented painter and an amateur naturalist. Because of these interests, he has a keen eye for the aesthetics of the landscape, and he and his family

---

enjoy exploring the details of the natural world around them. After a spell of rain, Mahood writes,

There were limitless carpets of wildflowers and such a variety of birds that the bird book was referred to almost daily. Joe always carried a framework for pressing plants in his vehicle and he discovered two Australian firsts, which had to be sent to Kew Gardens to be named, and three Territory firsts. [...] Nature was so prolific that each day brought a new magic to observe. (p. 99)

Rather than portraying the Tanami Desert as a barren wasteland, passages such as this show an evolving appreciation for its beauty and bounty. In general, Mahood does a much better job than White of getting over the colour green and assimilating to the aesthetics of the desert.

As time passes, the station-wife memoir is being replaced by a closely related genre, the station-daughter memoir. A number of recent books have appeared in this genre, in particular Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000). Kim Mahood, the daughter of Marie and Joe, left the arid Outback for an urban life, becoming a successful artist who, at the book's beginning, is living in a coastal city. As both a native-born Outbacker and a university-educated artist, Mahood can triangulate her experiences in the desert from two very different perspectives. This parallax lends a depth of field to her perspective that few other writers can generate. *Craft for a Dry Lake* exhibits one of the most complex physical and psychological portrayals yet written of the arid zones of Australia. Mahood is very interested in the sensuous details of place and in recording how her body inhabits the places she encounters. In her narrative she's not just a recording eye, but an experiencing body engaged in a somatic and visceral relationship with the land. As she progresses on her journey from Queensland to the Northern Territory, approaching the Tanami Desert, she describes how the external world begins to interfuse with her body, producing a psycho-somatic integration of land, body, and mind:

The colours begin to intensify, the light sharpens. I begin to feel something in my bones and nerves and viscera. I would not describe it as an emotion. It is more like a chemical reaction, as if a certain light and temperature and dryness triggers a series of physical and nervous realignments. I stop the car, get out and walk a little distance away from the road. My pulse rate is up, everything takes on a hallucinatory clarity. I sit first, breathing deeply, then stretch full length, inhaling

---



the smell of dry grass and earth, feeling the texture of grains of dirt along my bare arms. It is almost too much, this sense of belonging, of coming home. (Mahood 2000: 35)

Mahood works to break down the self/other distinction that has served to foster the sense of the desert as an alien place.

### 3. Mining

Gold and other mineral rushes in the Australian deserts brought hordes of miners, resulting in instant boom towns, most of which have now busted. Mining remains, however, an important source of livelihood. Nevertheless, mining is hard on the land, of necessity destructive, and the ethic of destruction for profit and the ethic of the gamble are interwoven in the culture that evolves from this enterprise.

The literature of mining and of the lure and lore of lost mines is strong and suggests a near-mystical symbolism in the link between industrial economies and nature perceived as exploitable resource. Probably the best known text in the literature of lost mines in the arid zone is Ion L. Idriess's *Lasseter's Last Ride* (1931). Lasseter perished while seeking to rediscover a rich reef of gold he had stumbled across years earlier in the Peterman Ranges of the Central Ranges bioregion. While focused on the details of Lasseter's search for the gold, and then on the search for the lost Lasseter, Idriess's book gives us occasional scenes portraying the ecology of the desert. For the most part, however, the book describes the desert as a forbidding space and its dryness as a formidable barrier. Lasseter's gold is hidden by little more than distance and aridity, yet it is effectively hidden nonetheless.

Numerous novels set in desert mining districts describe the desert and its residents in decidedly negative terms. In most cases the emphasis is on how the vast and hostile desert spaces serve to isolate the human community, which, combined with the inevitable greed associated with the search for mineral wealth, often results in a decline in morality, a combination Roslynn Haynes refers to as the Gothic Desert (Haynes 1998: 184-208). These elements can be seen in novels such as Kenneth Cook's *Wake in Fright* (1961), Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963), Thea Astley's *An Item from the Late News* (1982), and Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* (1996).

---

The impression one gets from much of this literature is that — to people of the coastal cities, who are the primary creators and consumers of this literature — the people of the arid inland are, like the desert itself, the wholly Other against which they can measure their own civility and sophistication. In order to generate their desired effect, these novels depend upon a non-ecological portrayal of the desert as vast, largely lifeless, and especially threatening. In this regard, Cook's *Wake in Fright* is typical. In the novel, a naïve Sydney school teacher, John Grant, has been teaching in Tiboonda, which is probably modelled on Tibooburra, along the ecotone of the Channel Country and the Simpson-Strzelecki Dunefields bioregions in the northwest corner of New South Wales. Looking about him in Tiboonda, Grant notes how the desert's aridity has sucked the life from both the landscape and the people. He observes that "there had been no rain for almost a year, the sun had withered every living thing except the salt-bush. The people had withered, their skins contracting and their eyes sinking as their stock became white bones" (Cook 1961: 6). Cook establishes a contrast between coastal Australia and the arid inland, illustrating how the inland is defined by its difference from the coast. This contrast is implicit in much literature about the desert, but Cook makes it explicit. He explains that the schoolteacher "was a coastal Australian, a native of the strip of continent lying between the Pacific Ocean and the Great Dividing Range, where Nature deposited the graces she so firmly withheld from the west" (p. 7). Summing up his descriptions, Cook tells us that Grant despises the desert, finding it "a variation of hell" (p. 7). Nothing in the novel ever suggests that Cook does not share the perspective of his character who, on his way home for the holidays, becomes trapped both by the desert's spaciousness and by its deceitful residents in the town of Bundunyabba, a fictional version of Broken Hill.

#### 4. Traversal

While pastoralism and mining have brought numerous Settler Australians to the deserts, for the majority of people the primary orientation to the deserts, and the basis for much of the literature, is the traversal. Travelling through the desert and subsequently returning to more settled regions along the coast to recount the tale is the dominant

---

desert narrative. From an ecocentric perspective the problem with so many of these narratives is that the desert is usually configured more as an obstacle to be conquered rather than as a worthwhile place in its own right.

The first English speakers to venture into much of the Australian arid zone, the nineteenth-century explorers, serve as a prototype for later traversal experiences. These explorers — Charles Sturt (1795-1869), John McDouall Stuart (1815-1866), Robert O'Hara Burke (1821-1861), William Wills (1834-1861), Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-1848?), Edward Eyre (1815-1901), Augustus Gregory (1819-1905), and Ernest Giles (1835-1897) — remain important icons in Australian culture and have continued to influence the way people think of the arid lands and their own place, or lack of place, in them. The first half of the twentieth century saw many non-fiction works describing travels, traversals, and travails in the deserts of Australia engaged in by scientific exploring parties, journalists, or adventurers. Writers in this tradition include David Carnegie, John Walter Gregory, H. H. Finlayson, Ernestine Hill, Francis Ratcliffe, C.T. Madigan, and George Farwell.

Drawing upon this tradition, but more conscious of the tourism potential of the deserts, is Arthur Groom's *I Saw a Strange Land* (1950). The book recounts Groom's visits to the MacDonnell Ranges, Finke, and Central Ranges bioregions in 1946 and 1947. Groom had been active in the development of the National Parks movement in coastal Queensland. He visited the deserts because he "wanted to see if Central Australia's scenery was grand enough, the climatic conditions moderate enough, to warrant tourist development in any large degree" (Groom 1950: 12).

Operating out of Hermannsburg, Groom spent several months bush-walking, often alone, to what have now become the major tourist destinations in the region, including Glen Helen and Ormiston Gorges, Palm Valley, Kings Canyon (Watarrka), Ayers Rock (Uluru), and the Olgas (Kata Tjuta). His purpose was to familiarise his audience with this 'strange land' and thereby, paradoxically, to reduce their estrangement from it. Indeed he seeks to convert strangeness from a liability into an asset; the land's strangeness is the source of its appeal to the tourists he hopes will visit the area; its otherness is what makes the land worth visiting and protecting, not despising.

---

While camping at Ellery Gap he notes a threat that becomes a recurring theme throughout his book and that reinforces for him the conviction that the central deserts are in need of the sorts of protections afforded by a national park system. After describing the splendour of the landscape, he laments that "The wild grandeur was marred only by prominent white signwriting on the red rock: 'KATHNER-HOPE CAMP, NOVEMBER 1945'" (Groom 1950: 48).

Developing this theme further, he ends this chapter by recognising the harm that road access has brought to Simpson's Gap: "The place was beautiful; and from a bank of sand I saw not so much the grandeur of it all, but empty beer-bottles in shallow water fouled by stock, empty tins, and a gallery of names painted in large white lettering on the smooth red rock. A white ghost gum had been shot at. It was all evidence of vandalism — following upon road access from Alice Springs" (pp. 77-78). Groom recognises the harm tourism can bring and in his book seeks to cultivate an appreciation for the aesthetics of the desert that will foster an appropriate ethic of care among his fellow travellers.

Among the best known works in the traversal tradition, especially outside of Australia, is Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980). In this book Davidson documents her sometimes<sup>4</sup> solo camel trek from Alice Springs 2,700 km to Hamelin Pool on the Indian Ocean. Christy Collis has argued for the uniqueness of this text in which, she proposes, Davidson has reconfigured the tradition of the desert explorer's traversal. In *Tracks*, Collis argues, "Davidson initiated a traversal not of physical but of cultural space, of a landscape constructed in over 150 years of non-Aboriginal spatial discourse as empty, dead, passive, useless, flat, blank, and vacant" (Collis 1998: 179). In contrast to this tradition, Collis proposes, *Tracks* "produces a desert space which is inhabitable, active, alive, and part, rather than the ancient foe, of the non-Aboriginal Australian subject" (p. 184).

I think in these claims Collis underestimates the degree to which at least some of the previous post-settler Australians portrayed the desert as inhabitable, active and alive, and overstates the degree to which Davidson challenges the image of the desert as empty, dead, and vacant. While many observers have certainly portrayed the desert as so much empty space, there are some (such as Groom) who did not.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, though Davidson may have presented the desert as more

---

inhabitable than did some earlier writers, it was not, apparently, inhabitable by her, for she did not write about living in the desert, but, like the explorers and travellers before her, about crossing it. And at the conclusion of her trek, Davidson did not decide to inhabit the desert, to make it her home; in fact she moved to that most un-desert-like of places, England. The implicit message is that the desert remains a suitable place for an adventure, but not a suitable place for a home.

Overall, even if interestingly inflected through a nascent ecofeminist sensibility, *Tracks* remains more similar to than different from earlier desert narratives. Reflecting a feature common in the work of many desert travellers, the desert's main value for Davidson lies precisely in its difference from familiar places. For Davidson, entering the desert is about gaining release from conventional responsibilities. Indeed the motif of shedding burdens runs throughout the book. Shortly before she begins the trek, Davidson is accused by a friend of being a selfish "bourgeois individualist". Stung by the charge, she consoles herself with the reflection that when she begins her journey "it will all be over. No more loved ones to care about, no more ties, no more duties, no more people needing you to be one thing or another, no more conundrums, no more politics, just you and the desert, baby" (1980: 105). Ironically, this consolation does more to confirm than refute the charge that she is bound on a selfishly individualistic quest.

Nevertheless, while I see *Tracks* as more continuous with the tradition of earlier desert exploration narratives than does Collis, at least two features distinguish it. First, and this is no mean feat, it is better written than most works in this genre. Davidson narrates a compelling story in vivid language. I am also persuaded that, in its self-reflective subjectivity, the book may represent a tipping point in the evolution of desert narratives, opening up certain possibilities for reconfiguring the desert, especially but not exclusively by women, that were less available before its publication. In *Tracks* the struggle to complete the journey is as much overtly psychological as it is physical. Davidson's willingness to expose her emotional vulnerabilities is perhaps related to her gender. In *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Kim Mahood comments on her reaction to *Tracks* in a manner that underscores this factor:

When I first read *Tracks* [...] my response to it was ambivalent. I found the whole thing too close for comfort. She articulated too clearly the complicated impulses and female messiness and fears I hated in myself. There she was, raw and visible,

a woman struggling as much with her own nature as with the practical and cultural obstacles involved in such a venture. (Mahood 2000: 231-32)

Especially notable in the exploration tradition for its intensive attention to a particular location is Roma Dulhunty's Lake Eyre trilogy: *The Spell of Lake Eyre* (1975), *When the Dead Heart Beats Lake Eyre Lives* (1979), and *The Rumbling Silence of Lake Eyre* (1986). Between 1972 and 1982, while accompanying her husband, geologist John Dulhunty, as he studied the hydrogeology of the lake, Dulhunty made extensive visits to Lake Eyre, the world's largest ephemeral lake, lying in the Stony Plains and Simpson-Strzelecki Dunefields bioregions. In her introduction to *The Spell of Lake Eyre* Dulhunty surveys the descriptions of the lake by earlier visitors. After summarising their various mostly negative reports, she replies:

But what damning descriptions they all are! No mention of the joy of experiencing its salt-sea freshness out in the middle of the Dead Heart; nothing of its scientific wonder, its caprices and fitfulness. No word of the unbelievable mirages which parade over it in early black-frost mornings, or late afternoons in winter, casting their strange spells. (Dulhunty 1975: 7)

She continues in this vein for another half a page celebrating the beauty and wonder of Lake Eyre.

Unlike many writers who portray deserts as timeless or eternal, Dulhunty recognises that Lake Eyre is an ever-changing landscape. By returning to the same location over a long span of time, Dulhunty is able to observe the evolution of the landscape. Indeed she witnesses the bed of Lake Eyre change from a barren salt flat to an inland ocean teeming with bird life, and returning again to an empty salt flat. Dulhunty was not a professional writer, and her work suffers from the sorts of infelicities one might expect from an amateur author. Nevertheless, her Lake Eyre trilogy is one of the most sustained and intensive literary studies of a specific desert ecoregion, informed by both scientifically astute observations and a poetically imaginative eye; as such, it deserves more attention than it has so far received.

Non-fiction writers aren't the only authors addressing themes of desert traversals. Indeed such traversals have been a common subject for novelists. The most celebrated example, Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), tells the story of a desert explorer modelled loosely on the ill-

---

fated Ludwig Leichhardt and his 1848 expedition intending to cross the interior from Moreton Bay (Brisbane) to Perth. Leichhardt's expedition vanished without a trace, a fact that certainly reinforced the notion of the arid interior as a foreboding place. White's novel is more an exploration into the psychology of such explorers than an inquiry into the characteristics of the desert country. Passages such as "the party entered the approaches to hell, with no sound but that of horses passing through a desert, and saltbush grating in the wind" (White 1957: 331) are psychologically evocative but hardly likely to overcome the prevailing antipathy to desert places.

Another novel involving a desert traversal is Dal Stivens's *A Horse of Air* (1970), a work that demonstrates some of the most ecologically astute fictional portrayals of the Australian deserts yet to appear. Both Stivens and his novel's main character, Harry Craddock, are amateur naturalists, and so the desert landscape is portrayed from the perspective of an ecologically informed and sympathetic sensibility. The novel involves Craddock's desire to find the elusive and possibly extinct night parrot. In search of the parrot, Craddock mounts an expedition into the Rawlinson Ranges of the Central Ranges bioregion and the adjacent Gibson Desert. What is most distinctive about Stivens's novel is that the deserts portrayed in it are extremely particularised and detailed. For example, the novel includes excerpts from the diary of one of the characters, Joanna, that include quite ecologically informed descriptions:

The Rawlinsons — and other ranges — are giant sponges that trap the rains and feed them slowly to the rockpools and to the wide belts of bloodwoods (*Eucalyptus terminalis*) at their base. In some ravines they feed water to scattered clumps of tall river red gums (*E. camaldulensis*). Beyond the gums stretches the vast ocean of petrified combers, the sandhills, with their froth of spinifex, mulga (*Acacia aneura*), saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia*, mainly), mallees (*Eucalyptus* spp.), and scattered desert oaks (*Casuarina decaisneana*). (Stivens 1970: 112-13)

While I don't expect every novel set in the deserts to include the generic and specific Latin names for every plant mentioned, it is refreshing to read a novel that is so aware of the diversity and richness of plant life in arid lands.

Susan Hawthorne's novel *The Falling Woman* (1992) describes the journey of two lesbian lovers, Estella and Olga, through South Australia.

lia into the central deserts in a manner that provides an especially strong feminist portrayal of the deserts. Alison Bartlett argues that *The Falling Woman* "is particularly interested in the desert being a place in which a women's culture might be located" (2001: 119). The novel characterises the desert both in terms of the female body and in terms of the global history of women's culture. For example, at one point we read that "a bulbous rock" they encounter is "like the Venus of Willendorf" (Hawthorne 1992: 37).

As the novel progresses we can trace the women's course through Coober Pedy, Witjira National Park, and then to Kings Canyon, Uluru, and finally to Kata Tjuta, which the novel particularly identifies with the female body. "[T]he rocks", we're told, appeared "like an old woman with lumpy patches on her body, or like one of those ancient figurines that are all buttocks and breasts" (pp. 251-52). After arriving, the two women enter a V-shaped canyon which resembles a womb and which they identify as a place associated in Aboriginal culture with birthing. In general, *The Falling Woman* is more ecologically aware in its portrayal of the desert landscape than have been many previous novels. It is also alert to how the desert landscape changes as the two women travel through it; their desert is by no means an undifferentiated space.

One of the best-known recent works from the arid zone is Doris Pilkington-Nugi Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). This book also dramatises a traverse, but, since it is told from the perspective of Aboriginal girls whose home is in the desert, it reverses the usual valence of such traversals. The book tells the story of three 'half-caste' Mardudjara girls, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie, forcibly removed from their families by the government of Western Australia in 1931. The girls had been living in the desert at Jigalong, along the ecotone where the Great Sandy Desert, the Little Sandy Desert, and the Pilbara bioregions overlap. Taken to the Moore River Native Settlement near Perth, the girls find themselves in a landscape that, because of how wet it is, strikes them as alien. On the banks of the Moore River on a rainy day, we're told that

The river and the flats on either side were full to overflowing. To the girls from the East Pilbara region, this chocolate-coloured river was a new and exciting spectacle, quite different from the normal pinky coloured salt lakes, creeks and rivers



back home. This sight only made Molly more aware that she was a stranger in this part of the country [...]. (Pilkington 1996: 68)

This description configures the usually dry water courses of the arid zone as normal. It is the well-watered landscape that is alien. In this way, the book inverts the usual pattern of desert traversals, for it is the arid inland that is the familiar and desirable home and the wetter coast that seems alien.

Beginning in this unfamiliar country, the girls escape from the settlement and journey more than 1,000 km to their homeland. Along the way, they pass through a diversity of increasingly arid landscapes, the Avon Wheatbelt, Yalgoo, Murchison, Gascoyne, and Little Sandy Desert bioregions. Pilkington pays close attention to these transitions, recognising that in each new bioregion the girls face different challenges in finding food and water, but also that each new bioregion indicates their progress homeward.

They had left the landscape of red loam, mallee gums, acacia trees and green fields and found themselves in a very different countryside; one of red soil, tall, thick mulgas, gidgies and the beautiful, bright green kurrajong trees that stood out against the grey-green colours of the other vegetation. (p. 106)

Finally, they recognise their approach to their homeland in the new colours and different vegetation of the landscape. We're told how they "took in the familiar landscape of the red earth, the dry spinifex grass and grey-green mulga trees. There was nothing to compare with the beauty of these plains that stretched in all directions" (p. 123). Pilkington's recognition of the changing ecology of the land serves not simply as a demonstration of botanical knowledge but is also fully integrated into the drama of the narrative.

Another recent book that recounts a traversal through the desert by a non-white woman is Eva Sallis's novel *Hiam* (1998). In this case, the woman is not from an Aboriginal culture that is at home in the desert, but a recent Arab immigrant who flees a domestic tragedy by driving impulsively north from Adelaide towards Darwin. Alison Bartlett proposes that *Hiam* presents a new way of seeing the deserts (Bartlett 2001: 120). However, though this novel presents us with a new kind of protagonist, I do not find that it really presents us with a new way of perceiving the desert. While there is much of interest in

---

*Hiam*, an ecocentric reading indicates that it repeats common images of the desert. For example, Bartlett proposes that “Hiam’s journey into the desert is not a conventional one of discovery; she is wanting to escape, she seeks self-annihilation. Her desire is the exact opposite to the traditional explorer narratives” (p. 120). This strikes me as a difficult argument to sustain, as clearly works such as *Voss* suggest that self-annihilation may well be strong motive in the explorer journeys. As David Tacey has suggested, “the real motivational force behind Voss and his explorers is the desire for death and disintegration” (Tacey 1995: 89). Bartlett argues that:

It is Hiam’s subjectivity as a Middle Eastern Muslim woman that determines [...] her spatial relations with the land, so that her description of “a pink lake. Monochromatically fairy-floss pink, with a small, iridescent centre”, strikes me as an entirely new perspective in desert description. (2001: 120)

It is not clear to me why such a description need be predicated on Hiam’s Muslim subjectivity, and, in any case, such descriptions are not new. In 1975, Dulhunty used quite similar language to describe the region around Lake Eyre, noting “the Dresden-china daintiness and fairy-palace beauty of salt-crystal formations glowing apricot in their centres; [and] the sunsets over the lake, flushed pink beneath the fiery beauty of an opal coloured sky” (Dulhunty 1975: 7). Rather than providing new perspectives modulated by her Muslim subjectivity, for the most part *Hiam* perpetuates the image of the desert as a void, a largely lifeless and undifferentiated place: “Red forever, seamless, shimmering, unlike anything she had ever imagined” (Sallis 1998: 37).

One might expect a writer with Sallis’s background, a scholar of Arabic literature who has spent time in the deserts of Yemen, to have a more nuanced and sympathetic view of the desert, interestingly inflected by the perspective of the desert-adapted cultures of the Middle East; however, I found my expectations for such a new perspective disappointed. Whatever innovations *Hiam* contributes to Australian literature do not involve perceptions of the desert.

---

## 5. Polyvocal Bioregional Texts

I would now like to consider several recent works that I think do begin to develop some new bioregionally informed perceptions of the desert: Barry Hill's *The Rock: Travelling to Uluru* (1994); Pat Lowe and Jimmy Pike's *Jilji: Life in the Great Sandy Desert* (1990); and the painter Mandy Martin's various collaborative projects: *Inflows: The Channel Country* (1996), *Tracts: Back o' Bourke* (1997), *Watersheds: The Paroo to the Warrego* (1999), and *Strata: Deserts Past, Present and Future* (2005). Though quite distinct, each of these works is multi-voiced and/or multi-genred, incorporating voices of different, sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting, perspectives. And they blend literary texts with the visual imagery of photographs and paintings. Taken together, these works suggest the emergence of a polyvocal bioregional tradition in desert literature and indicate fruitful avenues for further development.

Barry Hill's *The Rock* provides a polyvocal cultural and natural history of Uluru and its environs in the Central Ranges bioregion. While the focus is on 'the Rock', as he calls it, Uluru is not isolated from its cultural or natural context. Furthermore, in spite of Robyn Davidson's hope that politics could be one of the burdens she sheds when entering the desert, the messy contentions of politics are pervasive at Hill's Uluru. "Such politics", Hill says, "can't help but frame any journey to the Rock today. It's a new kind of journey that requires new ways of telling (and vice versa)" (1994: 2). The new way Hill attempts to tell the story is by writing what he refers to as a "poetical history", and to this end his text is highly intertextual, incorporating numerous and conflicting stories about the land and its history.

In the first portion of his book, Hill analyses various writers who have dealt with the Rock for their contribution to our understanding of it. His book is both a journey to the Rock and a journey through the literature and stories that have been produced about the Rock. Viewed this way, Uluru and the desert around it are not so much vacant space with a big rock plunked down in the middle, but a deeply storied landscape. Some of these stories are tens of thousands of years old; others are as recent as the latest tourist e-mail home. While Hill respects and grants priority to the Anangu stories of Uluru, he does not

thereby denigrate the stories of all the others who have been to this place.

Hill is particularly interested in showing how Anangu knowledge and land-use practices relate to scientific understandings. While Anangu knowledge and beliefs are not entirely reconcilable with the scientific perspective, Hill seeks to show how these approaches complement and supplement one another. Throughout his book, Hill moves toward an integration of all the various sorts of desert dreamings — Aboriginal, settler, tourist, scientific — with his personal experience of country. His personal responses link the narrative, but the book shows how all these other perspectives inform and adumbrate his experiences.

Another work that utilises Aboriginal perspectives in its presentation of desert country is *Jilji: Life in the Great Sandy Desert*. This book includes text and photographs by Pat Lowe and paintings by the renowned Walmajarri artist Jimmy Pike. Lowe and Pike lived for several years on the northern edge of the Great Sandy Desert, and their book provides a detailed look at some aspects of the ecology of that bioregion as perceived by members of the local Walmajarri population. For example, at the beginning of the book, in a section titled ‘The desert landscape’, we have a painting by Pike followed by several photographs of similar terrain taken by Lowe. These images are then discussed in the text. Lowe first tells us that “Much of the Great Sandy Desert consists of Jilji — long rolling sandhills or ridges with flat country known as Parapara lying between them” (Lowe and Pike 1990: 1). Providing greater detail, she then explains how

Here and there amongst the sandhills, a patch bare of growth called a Pilyurpilyurr, stands out as a red landmark from a long way. Where the action of the wind has braided the crests, natural hollows occur as if scooped out of the sand. Such a hollow, smooth and without plant life, is called a Larralarra. A Kurrkuminti is a similar but deeper hollow, with grass and small shrubs growing in it. This kind of hollow provides good shelter from the wind, and was favoured by the desert people as a sleeping place during cold weather. (p. 3)

Furthermore, *Jilji* has one feature of a bioregional text that is lacking in every other work I’ve considered so far; it is a text involving local knowledge written primarily for a local audience. In the book’s Preface, Lowe explains that because there are few resources concerning

---

the desert available for use in the schools in the Kimberley, "it is primarily with such schools in mind that I have written this book" (n.p.). While the knowledge contained in the book is valuable, of even greater significance is the attitude to the desert that is evoked. The image of the desert in *Jilji* could not be further from the perception of it as a vacant, lifeless, hostile void. Subtle gradations in the landscape are identified and named, and nearly every feature discussed in the book is considered for its utility for human well being. *Jilji* is of humble literary ambitions, but works such as it will probably do more to make settler Australians feel at home in their arid continent than will many a literary work of much greater celebrity.

Finally, I'd like to consider a set of multi-genred and multi-voiced bioregionally based projects involving the collaborative work being done by the painter Mandy Martin in conjunction with a number of different writers. In *Tracts: Back o' Bourke*, *Watersheds: The Paroo to the Warrego*, *Inflows: The Channel Country*, and *Strata: Deserts Past, Present and Future*, Martin provides paintings while several writers — Paul Sinclair, Peter Haynes, Guy Fitzhardinge, Tom Griffiths, Libby Robin, Jake Gillen, and Mike Smith — bring their diverse perspectives to bear on understanding the various desert places under consideration. Additionally, *Strata* contains paintings by eight Ikuntji women artists living in the area as well as paintings Martin did in collaboration with Smith, Fitzhardinge, Gillen, and Robin. Each of these texts combines various sorts of environmental knowledge about a particular place with aesthetic visual interpretations of that place.

*Tracts*, *Watersheds*, and *Inflows* are all concerned with different regions in the arid country of southwestern Queensland and north-western New South Wales, areas located in the Mulga Lands, Channel Country, and Simpson-Strzelecki Dunefields bioregions. Each contains landscape paintings by Martin along with essays that address the ecological and social implications of the changing role of pastoralism in these landscapes. In his introduction to *Tracts*, Guy Fitzhardinge, a pastoralist and rangeland specialist, explains that "the Project seeks to provide a 'feeling' for the region and its ecology through the examination of a sample range of landscapes and seasonal conditions" (Martin and Sinclair 1997: 5). In *Watersheds* Fitzhardinge explains that many of the towns in the region are being abandoned as the pastoral enterprise fails. In response, he laments, proposals have been made "to use

the west as a dump for nuclear waste, and imaginative policy makers can see it as a new industry for the west!" (Martin, Fitzhardinge and Griffiths 1999: 9).<sup>6</sup> Such a proposal reflects the still widely held image that these arid regions are worthless tracts of empty space, an image, unfortunately, that has been furthered by some of the literary texts I have considered earlier. Part of the mission of these projects is to envision positive alternative futures for the pastoralists and others living in this country, a future that, though still nascent and unclear, involves respect for the land rather than its use as a dumping ground for toxic materials.

*Strata* concerns a different location than the previous three texts. It focuses on Puritjarra, a rock shelter in the Cleland Hills of the Central Ranges bioregion near the western edge of the Northern Territory. Archaeologist Mike Smith's researches have discovered that the site has been periodically occupied for at least 35,000 years. In the book's Introduction, Martin, Robin, and Smith explain that

This book is about diverse kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing place. [...] In this interdisciplinary project, we explore several knowledge systems, Indigenous, scientific and artistic — and by locating them in a common place we seek *co-understanding*, for valuing the different ways each of us sees a single place that is significant, but differently so, for each perspective. (Martin, Robin and Smith 2005: 1)

To foster this end, *Strata* broadens the range of visual representations. As in the previous texts, Martin contributes her own paintings, but she also collaborated on paintings with each of the writers of the text: archaeologist Mike Smith, environmental historian Libby Robin, pastoralist Guy Fitzhardinge, and plant ecologist Jake Gillen. Further broadening the aesthetic range, the project includes paintings by Aboriginal artists connected with the area: Narputta Nangala Jugadai, Daisy Napaltjarri Jugadai, Molly Napaltjarri Jugadai, Anmanari Napanangka Nolan, Eunice Napanangka Jack, Colleen Napanangka Kantawarra, Alice Nampitjinpa, and Linda Ngitjanka Naparulla. These paintings portray the features of the country that are of most significance to the local indigenous community, showing it as an ecologically rich and aesthetically pleasing homeland.

Projects such as *Strata* and *Jilji* that include Aboriginal paintings suggest we may be thinking of 'literature' and 'narrative' in too lim-

ited of ways. These paintings often embody story and depict a narrativised landscape, and efforts that find ways to incorporate these sorts of indigenous visual narratives into the larger vision of the desert country will go a long way towards overcoming the still-too-pervasive Anglo-centric bias that perceives desert country more in terms of absence than of presence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Also known as 'stations' a term arising in 1815 originally "to describe an area inland from the settlement at Port Jackson where government stock were grazed". Consult the entry 'Station' in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (Wilde, Hooton and Andrews 1994) for literary examples.

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the Illawara people located in the area of Wollongong, NSW.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the prototypical station-wife memoir is Mrs. Aeneas Gunn's 1908 *We of the Never-Never*. It is set in 1902 in the Northern Territory on 'Elsey', a cattle station where she (Jeannie) and her husband (the boss) lived for thirteen months. Predictably for the time, Aboriginal portrayals are patronising, but Gunn's account of exploring masculine territory, such as participating in cattle-musters, conveys a genuine affection for the Outback, the Never-Never.

<sup>4</sup> The publicity for the book calls the journey "a solo trek", but in fact less than half the journey was solo.

<sup>5</sup> While the work of novelist Arthur Upfield (1890-1964) is largely unfashionable in part to do with the portrayal of the central character a 'half-caste' detective, Upfield populates the Outback with crime and mystery. He was the first foreign mystery writer admitted to the Mystery Writers' Guild of America. Upfield's environmental concerns can be found in *Gripped by Drought* (1932) and *Death of a Lake* (1954) both novels are set in New South Wales.

<sup>6</sup> The first nuclear bomb was exploded in October 1952 over Monte Bello Islands off the coast of Western Australia; followed by Emu Field and Maralinga (South Australia).

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- Astley, Thea. 1982. *An Item from the Late News*. St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press.
- Carnegie, David W. 1898. *Spinifex and Sand: A Narrative of Five Years' Pioneering and Exploration in Western Australia*. London: Arthur Pearson.
- Cook, Kenneth. 1961. *Wake in Fright*. New York: St Martin's.

- Dulhunty, Roma. 1986. *The Rumbling Silence of Lake Eyre*. Seaforth, NSW: J.A. and R. Dulhunty.
- . 1975. *The Spell of Lake Eyre*. Kilmore, NSW: Lowden.
- . 1979. *When the Dead Heart Beats Lake Eyre Lives*. Kilmore, NSW: Lowden.
- Davidson, Robyn. 1980. *Tracks*. New York: Vintage.
- Ellis, Rex. 1998. *Outback by Camel*. Roseville, NSW: Kangaroo.
- Farwell, George. 1950. *Land of Mirage*. Adelaide: Rigby.
- Finlayson, H.H. 1935. *The Red Centre: Man and Beast in the Heart of Australia*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Gregory, John Walter. 1906. *The Dead Heart of Australia: A Journey Around Lake Eyre in the Summer of 1901-1902, With Some Accounts of the Lake Eyre Basin and the Flowing Wells of Central Australia*. London: John Murray.
- Groom, Arthur. 1950. *I Saw a Strange Land: Journeys in Central Australia*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Gunn, Mrs. Aeneas. 1908. *We of the Never-Never*. London: Hutchinson.
- Hawthorne, Susan. 1992. *The Falling Woman*. North Melbourne, Vic.: Spinifex.
- Hill, Barry. 1994. *The Rock: Travelling to Uluru*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Hill, Ernestine. 1937. *The Great Australian Loneliness*. Melbourne: Robertson and Mullens.
- Hospital, Janette Turner. 1996. *Oyster*. Sydney: Random House.
- Idriess, Ion L. 1931. *Lasseter's Last Ride*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Lowe, Pat, and Jimmy Pike. 1990. *Jilji: Life in the Great Sandy Desert*. Broome, WA: Magabala.
- Madigan, C.T. 1936. *Central Australia*. London: Oxford University Press.
- . 1946. *Crossing the Dead Heart*. Melbourne: Georgian House.
- Mahood, Kim. 2000. *Craft for a Dry Lake*. Sydney: Anchor.
- Mahood, Marie. 1995. *Icing on the Damper*. Rockhampton, Qld.: Central Queensland University Press.
- Martin, Mandy, et al. 1996. *Inflows: The Channel Country*. Canberra: Goanna.
- , Guy Fitzhardinge and Tom Griffiths. 1999. *Watersheds: The Paroo to the Warrego*. Canberra: Goanna.
- , Libby Robin and Mike Smith. 2005. *Strata: Deserts Past, Present and Future*. Canberra: Goanna. Also available on line at: <http://cres.anu.edu.au/strata/contents.html>.
- , and Paul Sinclair. 1997. *Tracts: Back o' Bourke*. Canberra: Government Printer.
- Pilkington, Doris (Nugi Garimara). 1996. *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press.
- Ratcliffe, Francis. 1938. *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: The Adventures of a Biologist in Australia*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Ruhen, Olaf. 1957. *Naked Under Capricorn*. Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Sallis, Eva. 1998. *Hiam*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Stivens, Dal. 1970. *A Horse of Air*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Stow, Randolph. 1963. *Tourmaline*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- White, Myrtle Rose. 1955. *Beyond the Western Rivers*. Adelaide: Rigby.
- . *From that Day to This*. 1961. Adelaide: Rigby.
-



- . *No Roads Go By*. 1932. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.  
White, Patrick. 1957. *Voss*. New York: Viking.

## Secondary Sources

- Arthur, J.M. 2003. *The Default Country: A Lexical Cartography of Twentieth-Century Australia*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Bartlett, Alison. 2001. 'Desire in the Desert' in *Antipodes* 15(2): 119-23.
- . 1998. *Jamming the Machinery: Contemporary Australian Women's Writing*. Toowoomba, Qld.: Association for the Study of Australian Literature.
- Collis, Christy. 1998. 'Exploring Tracks: Writing and Living Desert Space' in McDonnell, Jennifer, and Michael Deves (eds) *Land and Identity*. Adelaide: Hyde Park: 179-84.
- Environment Australia 2000. 2000. 'Revision of the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation of Australia (IBRA) and the Development of Version 5.1 — Summary Report'. Canberra: Department of Environment and Heritage. On line at <http://www.deh.gov.au/parks/nrs/ibra/version5-1/summary-report/summary-report3.html> (consulted 14.01.2006).
- Haynes, Roslynn. 1998. *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McGregor, Gaile. 1994. *EcCentric Visions: ReConstructing Australia*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Stegner, Wallace. 1992. 'Thoughts in a Dry Land' in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*. New York: Random House: 45-56.
- Tacey, David. 1995. *The Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*. North Blackburn, Vic.: HarperCollins.
- Wilde, William H, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews (eds). 1994. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
-