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THE MUNGO EXCURSION

I knew the place, or its image, without knowing its name. Then I knew the name, but did not know it was the place. Lake Mungo. It's one hundred kilometres north-east of where the Darling River joins the Murray River, in far western New South Wales. That river route was a populous highway for Aboriginal Australia. Fifty kilometres or so downriver at Lake Victoria, close to the South Australian border, a centuries-old cemetery holding more than ten thousand Aboriginal graves was uncovered when the water level dropped in 1994. But when state lines were drawn, the map turned the area, known as the Western Division, into something of a no man's land—the back blocks as far as Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide were concerned. The locals believed in the region's promise, but state squabbling kept it from developing. The railway tracks didn't join. The rules for activities like gambling and drinking were different, and even the time changed as you crossed the arbitrary boundary. Still today the states can't agree on regulating the flow of water through the rivers, which is just about the biggest thing not to agree on in this dry and increasingly saline country.

The first time I ever stayed in a hotel was when my father took me on a business trip from Adelaide, where we lived, to Mildura. While he went out on his rounds, I was left to explore the irrigation history of the Murray River town. I loved the hotel, the made-over deco Grand, which to my adolescent fantasy might have been the hotel in *Some Like It Hot*. But the place I wanted to explore was out of my reach. Under glass at the reception desk was a photograph of sandhills called the Walls of China. That was its name before it was Lake Mungo.

Story has it that a woman married a man called Murray just so she could throw her arms around him at the surging junction of the rivers, at nearby Wentworth, and cry, “Murray, Darling!” Stories are loosely retreaded here, like old tyres, and combine with stubborn fragments of evidence to provide a kind of meaning. Why was the place called the Walls of China? How did it become Lake Mungo? I took my sightseeing seriously as a schoolboy, but it wasn’t until much later that I took the turn off that would bring me here. Going from Adelaide to university in Canberra, I drove through the riverland many times. My mother’s side had connections in the area. Names were vaguely known from family talk. Then around the ANU in the 1970s the new name started to be whispered. Mungo ... Mungo. I was giving a lift across that soft, flat country to one of the archaeologists who had worked at Mungo when I got my first explanation. Yes, a lake. But there was no water. It had dried up ten thousand years ago. And that was only the start.

She told me that in 1968 a geomorphologist called Jim Bowler, flying over the crescent of sandhills on the shore of a dry lake bed, had noticed layers of earth exposed by the prevailing wind. He went down for a closer look and recognized human bones embedded in the surface, disturbed by sheep. They turned out to be the skeletal remains of a nineteen-year-old woman who was cremated and had her bones broken up and buried here. After excavation, the bones were carbon-dated at 25,000 years and she was named Mungo Lady.

A couple of years later Bowler found another set of bones exposed close by. Those remains, known as Mungo 3, were carbon-dated at 32,000 years. The body was laid out with hands clasped together, daubed with red ochre, in the earliest known use of pigment for ritual. Since there is no ochre in the vicinity today, that suggests movement and interaction between people over long distances in prehistoric times. The body was identified as male, Mungo Man—a mate for Mungo Lady in the deserts of time.

The immediate significance of those discoveries more than twenty years ago was their antiquity. Up until the late 1960s, the oldest date for human presence in Australia was around 6,000

years. Until well into the twentieth century, Australian Aborigines were popularly regarded as living fossils. Their duration was given the same time frame as Biblical history, as if to emphasize that in the period it had taken Western civilization to advance from its crudest beginnings, Aboriginal life had scarcely moved. They were the losers in the evolutionary contest. Lake Mungo changed all that. It revolutionized Australian prehistory. To late twentieth-century people, concerned with their own survival, the Aborigines emerged as champion survivors. They had all the majesty of long duration and magnificent precedence. The Mungo finds entered folklore at 40,000 years old, a rough early date that was later revised forwards, then further back (as we shall see). To most intents and purposes, it equated with time immemorial.

There have been disputes since then. Prehistory is a speculative discipline. Scholars challenge the identification of Mungo 3 as male because the teeth show wear from stripping fibre, which suggests women's work. Skull differences gave rise to a controversial theory of two phases of migration from Asia in which the more delicately built or *gracile* (descended from the Peking Man type of *homo erectus*) colonized the more robust type (descended from the Javan *homo erectus*) in Pleistocene times. This fed a myth of two warring groups around the Murray-Darling junction in the pre-contact period. The Darling River blacks—the Barkindji—had a reputation as proud fighters, unwilling to “come in” (a euphemism for submission to white order). The explorer Thomas Mitchell was implicated in the revenge killing of Barkindji on his expedition in 1835. Folk memories of bloodshed across two hundred years expand into a time-frame of 40,000 years to produce a story of earlier, nobler savages being defeated by the ancestors of present-day Aborigines. That hypothetical invasion has then been used to justify the white man's occupation, as if to say that the Europeans were only doing to the Aborigines what the Aborigines had done to others before them.

After one hundred and ten kilometres of corrugated dirt from a turn-off near Mildura, a track goes in to Mungo National Park.

The ranger's house stands on the site of the original sheep station homestead. Nearby is the great airy woolshed, built back in 1869 of Murray pine hauled overland by Chinese, who came to Australia for the gold rushes of the 1850s and turned to the river for livelihood when their luck ran out. Their vegetable garden is nearby. Only one Chinese name survives in the records—Ah Tin, who sank a well in the district in 1879. Legend has it that the ghost of a Chinese bullocky who was crushed under his load of logs lingers around the mailbox here.

The lunette of sand dunes ten kilometres away to the east is a crenellated shimmer. The lake bed, covered in bluebush and saltbush, is a low, empty pan. The Celestials who worked at the woolshed could have looked across at the barrier of shining sand at the end of a weary day and named it for the outermost limit of their ancestral home, the Great Wall that they, as southern Chinese, had heard of but probably never seen. Or perhaps the site was named the Walls of China by their joking boss, claiming a wonder of the world as part of his own property. Dr Johnson urged Boswell to go and see the Great Wall so that his children “would be at all times regarded as the children of a man who had gone to view the wall of China”. The boss could claim that he had done so too, if he ever got home again.

The boss's home was Scotland, as for so many who scattered their names out here. The Murray River was named after Sir George Murray, a Perthshire man who was Secretary of State for the colonies. Mitchell, the explorer and surveyor, was a native of Craigend. Scots with money took up the large leaseholds that came on the market from the 1850s, building them into fiefdoms where their compatriots worked as shepherds, hutkeepers and builders. Highlanders driven to migrate by the Clearances were hired by lowlanders. The first owner of Gol Gol, which grew to a total of 345,407 acres and originally included the Mungo block, was James McLeod. Nearby Turlee was leased to Alexander McCallum in 1852, Arumpo to James Scott in 1859, Garnpang to William Taylor, a Glaswegian, in 1863. Mungo was known as North Turlee A Run when it came into the hands of John Ettershank, another Scot, in 1869, before passing quickly into the

hands of his brother-in-law Robert Patterson, then to his nephew John Hunter Patterson.

The Edinburgh Pattersons were an ambitious wool family who expanded their holdings into the back blocks of Victoria and across the border into New South Wales. The Mungo woolshed is among their monuments. Their famous Riverina wool stud, Boonoke, survives as part of F.S. Falkiner, now owned by News Limited. Lachlan Murdoch (another Scot) did his jackarooing there. The Pattersons donated their Melbourne mansion, also called Boonoke, to the Presbyterian Church. Alec McDougall and James Matheson are among the names of men who laboured for them in the early days: Scots working for other Scots in the imperial wool business, in a pattern that stretched back to the old country, an obdurate extension of their epic world of clans and wanderers, threatened hearths and tough social order, into a terrain as remote and different as could be. The novelist Joseph Furphy, who worked in the region in the 1880s, observed that, “social status, apart from all consideration of mind, manners, or even money, is more accurately weighed on a right-thinking Australian station than anywhere else in the world”. Those windswept Walls of China might have been a castle keep. And the Aborigines, presumed to be dying out, the victims of these new clearances, were not so much untouchable as invisible in the white caste system.

Even wildlife has clan ancestors in the sands of Mungo, where giant prehistoric versions of the wombat, the kangaroo and the emu enjoyed the good life tens of thousands of years ago, when the lake was full of water and the reedy shores abundant with shell fish. Then the land slowly warmed and the megafauna disappeared.

Between the wars, the last owners of Mungo used to hold picnic races near the southern end of the Walls of China. Cricket matches were followed by woolshed dances in which the district joined. The relics of their barbecues are out here too, where the wind blows the sand of the shorelines into a mound that is moving east at a rate of three metres a year. The same wind lifts the veil on the lakeward side, cutting through layers of earth the colours

of cassata. The Mungo lunette, twenty kilometres broad, may look in exaggerated photographs like a miniature Grand Canyon, but it's sand sculpture, melting and transient. The churning sand rearranges the order of things, making it hard for scientists to read—and new discoveries are made.

Nowadays, in a different spirit from those picnicking racegoers, we come on excursions seeking something more awkward—the country's soul. But there's a sense of *déjà vu*. Subliminally I recognize Lake Mungo from the last of the *Mad Max* movies, where its dunes provide the image of post-apocalyptic Sydney, with the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge adrift in its sand—the most confident human incursion on the continent reduced to toys bobbing in a dust bowl.

The settlers who moved in during the nineteenth century needed, along with capital, diligence and vast acreages, a fair mix of good luck and good management to cope with the extremes of this unfamiliar land. Pastoralists overstocked their sheep to maximize profits and treated native vegetation as renewable fodder, which led to devastating erosion in the rabbit plague of the 1880s. On Arumpo, adjacent to Mungo, 120,570 rabbits were killed in 1887. One of the Patterson brothers-in-law was remembered as a “rabbit maniac” for his obsession with devising ways to bring the pest under control. John Hunter Patterson himself, knowing it was a balancing act to make profit from wool in the back blocks, sold Gol Gol in 1882, only to repossess it in 1886 when the new owners were ruined.

Gol Gol was split up for soldier settlements after the First World War, when small lots of marginal country were handed out by the government to servicemen who had survived their time in the Middle East or Europe. Where sheep had trampled away the vegetation with their cloven hoofs, the rabbits turned the chewed-down surface to loose sand. These new crofters, pushed to quixotic overstocking, turned the country to another cratered version of the Somme or El Alamein. The Cameron brothers, Ewan and Angus, who acquired Mungo as a separate station in 1921, had worked as managers in the area. They must have watched the winds blow their land into surreal turrets and gulleys

from which, fifty years later, skeletons from another world would protrude. By 1934 they were selling it on to Albert Barnes, the last owner before it was resumed for national park in 1978.

The Barnes family used to hold religious devotions on the property. A manse had been built at Wentworth in 1859, from which the minister was expected to roam the whole area. It was hard to find incumbents. In 1905 the Presbyterian Church authorities warned that “no minister should be kept in such a parish...for longer than three years both on physical and spiritual grounds.”

The artist Russell Drysdale—another Scot—went out west in 1944, sketching drought for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He camped at Lake Mungo where he turned the parched land into the broken images of a wasteland: uprooted stumps and lurid shadows, trees that resembled charred bones, sand-caves that were decayed teeth. In his *Walls of China, Gol Gol*, heat blasts the earth like wartime bombing. Drysdale could not have known that his campsite was where the oldest cremation on earth would be found. But he said he got the strangest feeling out here.

Another artist had come through much earlier, Ludwig Becker, the ethnographer and naturalist on the Victorian Exploring Expedition of 1860. Cursed in its flawed leader, Robert O’Hara Burke, the extravagant expedition proved fatal for all but one of the main party. Becker wrote in his diary: “A very hell is our place out here. A few clouds of a small-cumulus-character floating in the sky and when near the sun green and pink coloured.” It was 112 degrees Fahrenheit.

The German-born Becker was a stout and childlike fifty-year-old who did bird imitations. Burke treated him badly, forcing him to load and lead the unhappy camels that had been imported from India for the Expedition. The artist had to wait until everyone else was asleep to do his writing and sketching.

Sent ahead of the main party, Becker lost his way in the vicinity of Lake Mungo. “When scarcely a mile away,” he recorded, “I was overtaken by a tremendous thunderstorm. Hail and rain were blown by the gale in nearly a horizontal direction over the plain and so dense was the shower that no object further

than a few yards was visible. The horse at once refused to go on, it turned round...with the head leawards licking the small pools of fresh water just forming under his eyes. After some time, the rain abated, I rode on and, as I thought, in the right direction but soon found out that I have lost my way. This was the first time in my life I met with such an accident, and when I discovered the fact a very strange but most disagreeable sensation overcame me. It was now near sunset, still raining and neither sun nor horizon was visible; I composed my mind and moved on systematically.”

Becker saw God’s bounty in the manifold detail of the natural world, marvelling with a miniaturist’s attention as he drew a mollusc, a lizard or a tick. One of his last images is of a rat that troubled the camp. It is drawn with joy for the fine-whiskered fellow who can survive in conditions where the artist will not.

Becker had collected archaeological relics along the Rhine before he left home. He found a Shakespearean death mask in a rag shop in Mainz in 1849 that he tried to sell to the British Museum to pay for his ticket to Australia. The Museum only borrowed it, and multitudes flocked to see it when it went on display. In his Melbourne lodgings he kept a bat for company.

Becker is remembered for his depictions of the Aboriginal people he encountered. He said they were “of a much higher class than is usually and wrongly stated in works treating of the same subject”. The portraits he produced on the Expedition show engaging individuals like Watpipa, a grizzled old man with a bandaged knee and a walking stick, who leads the way with the gravity of Moses; and young Dick, “the brave and gallant native guide”, whose hat band flaps in the breeze as he relaxes on the ground. A little picture called “Women in mourning” shows two women with gypsum caked on their heads in widows’ caps and their eyes masked with white—the traditional practice of the Muthimuthi. Becker might have seen it as another kind of death mask.

One night a meteor, half the size of the moon, fell on to the dark plain. Becker painted it like the Star of Bethlehem, using slow-drying Chinese white to accentuate the glare. The month before he died he painted two dingoes poised at the edge of a

baked-biscuit plain and the sun, like a cone of light from a spaceship, irradiating the horizon in what might have been his personal vision of the Second Coming.

Becker perished from exhaustion in the country north of the Darling on 29 April 1861. “Oh for your neck,” he said to his companion just before he died, wanting to swing round and change position. They dug his grave during that night—incorrectly marked on some maps today as “Dr Beckett’s grave”.

I wish I could pinpoint when the name Mungo first became attached to this stretch of land. It was not in use when James Matheson built the tank here in 1880, but it had appeared by 1905 when the official maps were made. When the lease was renewed in 1885 a residence is listed among the improvements, built of Murray pine in the same drop-log construction as the woolshed and probably dating from the same time. The overseer lived in the house—a Glaswegian? It is said that a picture of St Mungo’s hung on the wall to remember the home parish, most likely St Mungo’s Chapel near Glasgow. Mungo was the patron saint of that city. New owners bring new household gods and new names.

The original Mungo, also known as St Kentigern, was a whimsical fellow. Born at Culross, Fife, in the sixth century, he trained as a monk. On the night that a neighbouring holy man died, he placed the body on a cart yoked to two wild bulls. Where the bulls stopped was the place ordained by God for the blessed man’s burial, the “dear green place” that became Glasgow. Mungo’s attributes include a fish, a ring, a bird, a bell and a tree. His bell was mysteriously lost; the bird was dead until he took it in his hands and brought it back to life; the tree was burnt by him in order to revive the monastery fire; the fish was caught with the Queen’s ring in its mouth. The unfaithful Queen had given the ring, a present from the King, to her knightly lover. The jealous King, seeing the ring on the knight’s finger, slipped it off while he slept and threw it in the river. Then he demanded that the Queen produce the ring. She turned to Mungo who told his monks to go fishing and bring him their first catch. The fish—a salmon—had the ring in its mouth and the Queen was off the hook, thanks to

Mungo, who was a wizard when it came to the quandaries of life.
His echo is heard in the riddling childhood verse:

The tree that never grew
The bird that never flew
The fish that never swam
The bell that never rang.

The Glaswegians on the plains of Gol Gol might have recited those words as they wondered at the world in which they found themselves.

In Gaelic, which some people spoke out here, Mungo means “dear friend”, as Glasgow means “dear green place”. The most famous bearer of the name is Mungo Park, the young Scots surgeon explorer who disappeared in Africa in 1809, presumed drowned. In Australia the name may have stuck out of a sense of irony, like Ivanhoe, a town 180 kilometres to the north, which has the name of the novel Sir Walter Scott wrote when he had stomach cramp. “Used to be a rail town. Now it’s a jail town,” the Ivanhoe storekeeper quips today, referring to the fancy correctional facility with bright orange roofing, custom-designed for Aborigines, that opened last year.

An English (as opposed to Gaelic) derivation for Mungo would be more mixed. It would be related to words like “mongrel”, “mongoose” and “among”, where it means “betwixt and between”. A “mungo” was eighteenth-century slang for a square peg in a round hole, a dork. In the wool business “mungo” or “mong” was a mixed clip of low grade wool. A run not far north of Mungo is called Mong on the official map. Is Mungo a nonce word? It lodges in the mind, like grass seed, without much notion of where it comes from.

The language spoken by people along the Darling River is Barkindji, meaning “belonging to the river”, a self-description of both people and language. Several different languages are spoken in the region, corresponding with distinct groups of people and their domains. The language spoken inland from the river, in the dry country spreading south towards Lake Mungo, is Ngiyampaa,

meaning “word-world”, an etymology that unites language and territory. One dictionary credits “mungo” as a transcription of the Ngiyampaa word for “canoe”, *mangar*. The river people’s word is *pulthuru*: no relation. Not that people stayed put in that part of the world. It was common for Aboriginal people to speak more than one language as they crossed each other’s country. A Ngiyampaa word for “canoe” could have been picked up along the Darling in Barkindji country, especially after the Europeans came and the order of things was broken.

When Aboriginal people were rounded up from their tribal lands and herded together in government-run camps, little regard was given to place of origin. People married across traditional groups and kinship systems fractured. The consequences of such forced uprooting can be traced in the sorry life stories of many people today, including those who have died in custody. The linguists who recorded the languages of the area—women mostly, lugging bulky tape-machines down dusty roads—found that the speakers of different tongues who were living together in settlements would dispute which word, from which language, was which. Memories faltered. The lingo was all jumbled up.

Perhaps “mungo” became a generic word for Aboriginal canoe among the white population, like boomerang or gunyah. It appears in print for the first time with that meaning in George French Angas’s *Savage Life & Scenes in Australia and New Zealand* (1847). The canoes were low, light craft of curved bark that could carry two or three people, and their fire, across water. In 1910 Daniel Cudmore, a pastoralist at Avoca on the Darling, presented a “Mungoe”, a bark canoe, to the South Australian Museum, along with photographs of it in use. It is on display in the splendid new Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery unveiled there last March. (Daniel Cudmore was the great-uncle of my maternal grandmother, who was born Margaret Rosa Cudmore Andrews in 1900. She died this year.)

The question arises why a property inland from the rivers, without a trace of permanent water, would be named for a canoe. There were hardly likely to be boating excursions. Does it matter if the origin of a name disappears? It is the most elusive kind of

trail to follow. Perhaps there's a double etymology in which a memory of Glasgow's genial saint is mixed with a lost Aboriginal meaning. That can happen if one person hears a word and thinks it means something else. There's a theory that a missing language may have been spoken by the people who actually lived here, people who have vanished. A few shards of their language are left perhaps, a broken word-horde that is enough to suggest a complete word-world that existed once, not so long ago. Those people were dispersed, taking the fullness of their language with them, people who called the place Mungo because that was what it was called for them, the people for whom Mungo was always its name.

Now Mungo speaks for a whole complex of archaeological discoveries, Aboriginal claims and rights, and environmental and heritage possibilities. It has even given its name to a geomagnetic event. Thirty-thousand years ago the earth's magnetic axis moved 120 degrees off-centre, nearly reversing itself, as north became east-south-east for a couple of thousand years, before it slowly returned to position. The disorientation was detected by analysis of clay in the long-undisturbed fireplaces of the Walls of China. It's also called after this place, "the Mungo Excursion".

And there's Mungo Lady.

"In 1992, at a formal ceremony on the Lake Mungo lunette, the Mungo 1 remains were returned to the custody of local Aboriginal groups, where they are securely stored in a temporary keeping-place," write John Mulvaney and Johan Kamminga in their 1999 revision of Mulvaney's magisterial *Prehistory of Australia*.

Secure perhaps, but temporary. One Aboriginal custodian of the site wants Mungo Lady reburied with due ceremony. "We want her to be put right back where she came from," says Mrs Alice Kelly, eighty-year-old Muthimuthi elder, one of the groups with close connections to the place. "She came back to tell us something special. They just have to take this one more step in putting this very special person to rest."

Meanwhile an archaeologist who has worked there from the outset says he would prefer any reburied remains to be under-

ground in a vault with a time lock, leaving the question of future research open.

“He better have good answers,” says Mrs Kelly.

I don’t know where the idea came from to be at Mungo for the turn of the millennium. I had written a novel, *The Custodians* (1997), inspired by the place—not loosely inspired, since the inspiration was specific and powerful, but in fictionalizing it I changed some things in significant ways so that my imaginary version would be free to speak in its own manner, at a respectful distance from the complex issues surrounding the real place. Some of my friends were attracted by the place and, once it came up, the millennium idea was inevitable. Not that a millennium is anything much on Mungo terms. As Brian Hunt, a Barkindji custodian of the site, explained to us, the latest dating of the bones to come out of the laboratories at ANU was 60,000 years. There’s a degree of macho swagger about pushing the date further back. It shakes down everyone else’s theories about the place.

We commandeered the cabin accommodation at the lodge outside the gates of the Park and came loaded with tucker and booze. We had a party tent with a sound system, lights and a dance floor, and a combination cooler and barbecue that had been towed all the way from Melbourne. It was not too hot, the sky was a dusty blue and the earth was apricot-pink after recent rain. An assorted cast gathered: the dedicated organizers and last-minute ring-ins; a pair of doctors, a puppet-maker, a derivatives trader, a professor of Gender Relations, a clutch of old China hands, some tubby diplomats and journalists, administrators, kids and elders, a Barbie doll, a vegetarian in robes. Forty people in all.

The setting at the lunette was conducive to time travel, to feeling dwarfed and transitory, which is one version of the sublime. The sensations of distance and space, of changing temperature and shadow, of meagreness or plenty depending how you looked at it—within the vast amphitheatre formed by the ancient lakebed—were physically and psychically arousing.

People wandered in ones and twos and threes to their own

vantage points among the eroded sand mounds, called residuals, that stand like termite nests on the slopes. We watched from the Walls of China as the last sun went down. The kids were bored. Sunsets take too long. The sun squelched and sizzled way across the plain and was gone. "Come back," someone yelled, still hoping for the elusive green flash. Maybe other drugs were needed for that.

Then people moved to the other side, to the east, as if to set up vigil for the morning, to make sure the sun returned. That's where the new sandhills formed, sheer steep runs of sand. The kids jumped right in, rolling down in crazy arcs, ploughing the sand with their angled limbs, like mobile Swiss Army knives with all the bits extended. The grown-ups followed, rolling more scientifically, like accelerating logs tumbling towards a river, all the way down. At the end we were frosted over with that fine sugar sand. Our heads were spinning, as if we didn't know which way was up. Perhaps that's how it feels when the earth lurches on its axis.

A lone jogger came through with a curt nod on his way to a position atop a peak, where he looked like Caspar David Friedrich's painting of *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*. He turned out to be German. Did he know about his eccentric countryman, Becker, who was Friedrich's follower?

We heard voices as we drifted back to the car park. Four young men appeared, dressed in suits. At the base of the dune they were singing the REM song "It's the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)". But their voices didn't carry. Then they piled back into their car and honed off in a trail of dust.

There's television, even out here. At midnight, back at our cabins, we watched Sydney break into a cheesy pyrotechnic smile, Eternity; then the Chinese flag, retrieved from space-flight, raised over Tiananmen Square; lasers in the sky over the new Berlin; a cancan of lacy lights round the Eiffel Tower. Hour by hour, city by city, through that long morning, the world went up in fire.

We danced outside to techno and Yothu Yindi.

Anywhere within reach of the river is irrigated these days. It's a new version of the promised land in which vineyards and

orange groves, olives and almonds, and boutique arboreta for things like cricket bat willows, are replacing the old pastoral industries. The plantations guzzle water. Who knows when the promissory note will finally be called in? We consumed the local stuff for our party—wine and food—kept chilled in the generator-powered cooler van. Prosciutto and melon, kebabs and tofu, and sparkling shiraz from not far away on the river. It was an occasion of the grape, inspired in part by Stefano di Pieri, the incumbent master chef at Mildura's old Grand Hotel, who has a television program called *A Gondola on the Murray*.

Dawn came through the ghost-grey trees. The apostle birds, also known as lousy jacks, squawked for left-over potato chips in voices loud enough to annoy the drowsiest reveller. A woman was lying spread-eagled on the red airstrip at the back of the lodge. Had someone been beamed up? Or down? We walked slowly, searching out the coffee, like scavengers ourselves, eating Vegemite as a hangover cure, reassuring ourselves that there was still time for a global disaster to happen in someone else's time-zone while we were safely, remotely here. All around, the aromatic bush—sparse, spiky, drooping—vaporized in the warming air.

It's not everyone's kind of place. On an earlier occasion when I was here, one of the guests stayed in the cabin the whole time, reading Alan Bennett's *Writing Home*, that witty journal of a North Countryman's adventures in the metropolitan world. The reader explained that his wife liked being out on a wide earth scattered with leaves like ashes, but *he* preferred the green enfolding Cotswolds.

We were all wearing dark glasses against the glare.

Brian Hunt, the Barkindji elder we asked to guide us, came out from Gol Gol with his wife Chris. The small river town where they live was once a staging post to the station of the same name that included Mungo. Brian took us round the Visitors' Centre at Mungo National Park. The display gives vague and restricted information about Mungo 1 and Mungo 3 and any other human finds. Brian stuck to his script in a good-humoured way, telling us

what the signs said, giving us an authorized form of words. He explained formally that the three new dating techniques—uranium series, electron spin resonance and optically stimulated luminescence—coincide in a date range from 56,000 to 68,000 years for Mungo 3. As we ambled over to the woolshed, he said he did not want to contradict the signage. Then he pointed out a fence rail with a scar where a narrow, typically Barkindji shield had been cut from the tree.

Out on the Walls of China he showed us the ancient hearths. They were not where we would have looked for them, but over to the side. Brian found them by locating tiny fish—ear fossils, called otoliths, embedded in the surface of the earth. He said he never knew, when he came out here, what would have gone since last time. The wind erosion that uncovered the sites also blew them away. People like us who came to wonder also souvenired things. The hearths were barely more than a conceptual pattern of earth shadings and studdings of charcoal or bone. We went barefoot, treading differently, learning to see things that had been invisible before. Brian told us that the heritage people had created some fake hearths as a way of monitoring how much goes missing. It's about thirty percent.

His *pièce de résistance* was the skeleton of a Tasmanian tiger, long extinct on mainland Australia and probably extinct in Tasmania too, despite a persistent legend and attempts to clone one from a museum specimen. It was little more than an outline of white dots, like a necklace of small teeth broken and buried in the sand. It took an act of faith to see it.

The unguardedness of the place was even harder to grasp. We could just come out here and stumble around. There were warnings and fines, and a ranger who ticked people off, but no fence, no gate, no admission ticket, no designated route. Brian said anything like that would only encourage the vandals. It's a national park. It's free to all. But he thought people should go with an indigenous guide who might teach them some respect.

As the sands have shifted, so have the politics surrounding Mungo. After its archaeological importance was established in the 1970s, it was listed as part of a World Heritage Site, under

Federal government supervision. The listing carried the obligation to implement a management plan for the whole area, including Mungo National Park, which has since been enlarged by acquisition of adjacent land. Meanwhile the State government legislated that the management of national parks should pass into the hands of traditional Aboriginal owners. At the time that meant the land councils, the representative bodies of local Aboriginal communities. Lake Mungo fell between three land councils. Long negotiations ensued, involving Federal and State bureaucracies, the pastoral leaseholders and the land councils. The negotiations are still going on—after twenty years.

The situation was complicated by the High Court rulings, *Mabo* in 1992 and *Wik* in 1996, that opened the way to “native title” claims over former pastoral land. Native title claimants, who need not be the same people as represented by the land councils, must show an unbroken connection with their country. There are three native title claims to Lake Mungo at present, one of which, from the Barkindji, Brian Hunt’s people, has passed the initial registration test. That is why the mark of a Barkindji shield blazed from a tree used for a fence rail is so important.

At the moment the place is in limbo. It seems to be deteriorating for lack of care. National Parks say no one wants to negotiate. It’s costly and often thankless. Lots of talk, lots of travel. Aboriginal Affairs say the government won’t put up the money for the process to be worked through properly. One day, I trust, we’ll get there. I don’t suppose succeeding generations will be able to run around out here as I have done. At stake are not only vast tracts of land, but the custodianship of one of the world’s most significant places.

Back at the party tent, Brian picked up his guitar. He sang a song he had written about Mungo. He sang a song about Ponde, the mighty Murray Cod that is now scarce in the wild. He sang with feeling. He used to be a travelling country-and-western singer. His father was a shearer. Brian is a descendant of those feared river blacks. For an elder, he is more like a middle-aged pin-up. Some people wished he looked more tribal. But Brian doesn’t wear body paint, only his green guide’s uniform. He is a

member of his clan in ways that are not always visible. In that he's as tribal as any of us. Brian drank his tea and recited some of his own verse about saving water, and about reconciliation between black and white. He sang more songs, by Satchmo and Sammy Davis Jnr, and Gracie Fields and Vera Lynn. He is used to singing for coach tours. "We'll Meet Again" acquired a spacy resonance out there. We sang along. Somehow we all knew the words.

Beyond the circle of light from the tent—our portable generator-cooled watering hole—the night was dark and wide. The canopy of blackness in every direction contained undisclosed possibilities of the future. There was nothing very scary about it.

Brian finished up with Slim Dusty's classic song. His voice carried through the p.a. system: *It's no place for a dog/ 'Round a pub with no beer.*

It was a bit of a joke, because there was no beer.

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