

A New Desert

Trekking in the Simpson

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The Australian desert: historically a place of heartbreak or of God. Explorers vanished into it. Pioneers met bitter ends there. Wives killed themselves for loneliness. Nowadays convoys of Toyota tourists charge across it, enjoying its beauty and breadth, but in an ambiguous way, as if there were something in it to conquer. Something dangerous to be put down.

For Indigenous people, who knew it as well as their own bodies (in a sense, their country *was* both body and mind), it was a large garden that sustained them for thousands of generations. Withholding sometimes, when the dry went on longer than usual, but generally so bountiful that they could gather enough food in a couple of hours to grow fat. When Europeans arrived inland, Aborigines were reported to be "strong and athletic, often six feet tall, very intelligent and quick in their perceptions, with exceptional eyesight and particularly fine teeth".

They survived major climate changes, adapting and responding to the pulse of global weather patterns. They had brought fire technology with them, which they adapted to local conditions, using it to clean the country and make it more productive. Upward of 40,000 years of productivity in the arid heartland: not bad.

Of course it's inane to compare that culture favourably with post-industrial culture. The sum of human happiness was probably about the same. The point is not that Aboriginal culture was superior or inferior to any other, but that it was a great culture. And colonisation tore it asunder.

I went to the Simpson Desert recently, with a group of scientists and friends. We walked about 10 to 15 kilometres a day; camels carried our gear. The reason for going, apart from the enjoyment of strolling, campfires, quietude and stars, was to investigate an archaeological site west of Birdsville.

The Simpson is about two-thirds sand dunes. They lie parallel to a huge anticlockwise rhythm of wind which hasn't altered in 20,000 years. The rest of the desert consists of salt pans, clay pans, gibber-stone plains, dried-out lignum swamps, the stubs of hills and, usually, a few isolated pinpricks of water: wells, rock holes, soakages.

So what we encountered was anomalous and strange. Considerable rain had fallen, so that between the dunes lay small shallow lakes, still as glass. The stars, which crust the desert sky quite unbelievably, shot their light upward from the skies lying on the surface of the water. And the waterholes were sometimes miles long, deep and clear. They were busy with ducks, dotterels, brolgas, black swans, cormorants and pelicans. In the evening, formations flew from one place to another, crying out. Deceptive country - an inexperienced person could be out there a month later and die of thirst. Sad country, too.

The closer we got to permanent water, the more Aboriginal artefacts we found scattered about. Stone pestles and mortars, grinding stones, flints, basalt axe heads, chipped glass spearheads which had made their way along trade routes from contact points with Europeans. It was like walking into a deserted house and finding dinner on the table. As if the occupants had left in a hurry. As if the room still held their warmth.

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The Toyota pick-up is waiting for me in Birdsville. It's a four-hour drive to the camp, which is on the banks of a waterhole. We have to hurry to reach there before dark. It's difficult driving, easy to get lost or bogged. Long light

incandesces the ground. It's like the bottom of an ocean, the tide gone out long ago, leaving behind pools and strange life forms.

We arrive just on dark. Everyone is sitting around a fire. The camels have been brought in from their browsing and are tethered to trees. Their bells let out an occasional ting. Our band consists of scientists, artists, linguists, filmmakers, writers, an Aboriginal ranger - a descendant of the original owners, the Wangkangurru - a couple of paying guests and a crew to nanny us through.

In the morning, we walk to the kopi caps - the cynosure of our journey. ('Kopi' means 'gypsum'. It's a word from south-eastern Australia that has become generic, like 'coolamon' or 'boomerang'.) The stockman who discovered these whitish globes thought they were dinosaur eggs and took a few. But there has been remarkably little damage done, considering how long they've been here.

About 500 years, our archaeologist says. They are piled up over what he assumes to be a grave. They are fashioned from a plaster made by burning gypsum and some other ingredient. (We don't know if the gypsum is from this area, or if it was traded in from elsewhere.) The guess is around 60 caps, but possibly twice that. Yes, probably a grave, but no one knows whether there's a body in there.

Another in the group tentatively disagrees: this is more likely to be an increase site of some kind. (A place where relevant rituals would be performed to guarantee the continued creation of animals, plants and social forms.) Anyway, it's pre-European. And they are definitely mourning caps, worn by widows and close female relatives when a man has died. The women would have shaved their heads (their hair was already cropped because it was used to make string), and then the plaster would have been moulded around their skulls, down, it seems, to the brow ridge. Such a cap would feel, I imagine, like a close-fitting helmet, uncomfortable, itchy. They were worn for the entire mourning period, which might have been weeks.

We know about mourning caps from sites along the Murray-Darling Basin, and from eyewitness accounts. The practice must have migrated up to the desert from there. (Genetics, languages and customs run up and down river systems, rather than spreading out to the sides.) Paintings by George French Angas in the South Australian Museum show women wearing caps like these in the 1840s. Yet this site has not been in continuous use. Which means that it is unusual, perhaps unique.

And so the speculation begins. If there are 60 caps, that would represent not just wives and blood relatives but almost all the women from an entire language group. Which in turn would mean that whoever is buried there was an extraordinarily important man. His political ascendancy seems to contradict the ethnographical consensus that power in desert cultures was shared out equally, through an intricate system of checks and balances. Individuals did not, and could not, rise to the top of a pyramid. There was no pyramid. But was there some social differentiation in this case, which made this man more akin to a New Guinea Big Man? (The Big Man phenomenon was to the world of kinship what investment is to the commercial world: the laying out of resources in the hope of a greater return later on.) And if so, how did he gain his status?

Was this a freak incident, occurring just once because of some local variation that we cannot guess at? Or were somewhat hierarchical structures not uncommon in pre-contact times? In many other communities around the world, power and resources are surrendered willingly to trusted leaders, giving them consent-based power - power from below - rather than coercive power. The egalitarianism of later Aboriginal communities might have developed when smallpox hit, levelling the pyramid.

Did he control some kind of trade, or a surplus supply of some commodity? He must have known many connecting links of Dreaming, travelled widely and attained great ceremonial knowledge. Or could it be that every now and again, in any culture, any era, someone comes along who is exceptional - someone whose intellect, talent and integrity shine out and are recognised by everyone, are precious to everyone?

The only thing certain is that we do not know, and will never know, what drama unfolded on these banks 500 years ago.

We leave the caps, coolabags and water behind us next day, and begin to cross the dunes. The quiet is accented by the susurrations of camels' feet over the sand, and the creak of their gear.

It's astonishing how many implements we find: stones traded in from distant quarries where they were pitted on site to reduce their weight, then chipped into shape by the recipients. There are millstones, mortars and pestles; there are bits knocked off pestles to be used as instant tools, for cracking hard seed like quandong nuts. Throughout the swales are fields of nardoo, a plant whose seeds were ground into flour. People would have returned to these tools when the season was right. Some have been left on comfortable, stable dunes - good places to sit while you work away at your task.

Most of what we find is refuse. (I think of houses with rusty car bodies or upturned children's tricycles in the backyard.) The irony is not missed on us, that what these people threw away we pick up and want to keep.

On the third day out, we find the biggest grinding stone I've ever seen. It could be a modernist sculpture, admired in any of the world's galleries. It is an odd boat shape, with a hammer-dressed face and two perfect grooves on each side, about 25 centimetres long. It weighs, we guess, around 16 kilograms. It would probably have been carried on a woman's head. Impossible that she walked so far! It is not, our experts tell us, a classic type; it's unusual, intriguing. There is some disagreement as to its precise purpose. One of the scientists demonstrates what he thinks the grinding technique would have been: a lift and a tilt, with the seeds trickling in from the side. He says that beside it would have been stone bowls or coolamons, holding flour and water. It looks like an awkward movement for such a heavy thing.

I ask if it shouldn't be taken to a museum. But there's very little storage room left in Australia's museums. The new orthodoxy is to leave these kinds of finds where they are; they will be preserved out here in the dry climate. But in truth they will eventually crumble, or be broken and scattered by cattle, or buried, or scoured away by sand and time.

There is a scrap of red ochre on the stone. A historian tells us that there was an important trade route through this area, particularly for red ochre. It was a hugely valuable commodity, used in ceremony, bestowing high esteem on individuals and their clan groups. Warriors came down wearing full war regalia to pick it up, bringing with them pituri to barter.

These great gift exchanges occurred at various trade-route intersections. Another historian describes what they were (and still are) like. People would put everything in the centre of the group: shields, spears, necklaces, food. (More recently, tins of bully beef, skirts, billy cans.) It was important not to show greed. A senior person would take the first pick, thus demonstrating correct protocol to those following. He or she might choose a spear or digging stick, then another senior person from the visiting group might pick a boomerang, and so it would continue.

Where the dunes have eroded, there are signs of campfires 12,000 to 13,000 years old. There are middens of freshwater-mussel shells, too, compacted in sediments of sand or clumped along the watercourses. The Wangkangurru ancestors used, abandoned and re-entered this area, following the wax and wane of climate change across aeons.

Who were they, these ghosts? How did they think? What was their sense of humour like? (What are ghosts after all, but people whose presence is powerfully felt yet who cannot be seen.)

I lie on my back on a sand dune and almost hear them. Working, laughing, squabbling, preparing for ceremony, preparing for a fight, theologising. Or walking along, wordless, as we do. They would have known exactly which spot in this 'wilderness' they had left their grinders, to be used again when they returned, would have known each sandhill and what could be found to eat there, every swale in which to gather nardoo, every patch of gidgee or coolabah for making shields and coolamons. And when they reached a place where a big ceremony was to be held, the sound of hundreds of women working at their stones must have created a din like a stonecutter's workshop.

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Lying on your back facing an unfathomable sky is all very well, but beyond the blue is cold black, as night reminds you. The blue on a pond's surface, though, belongs to earth, to home. In any landscape, water acts like a magnet. And these ephemeral lakes scattered through the swales, never more than a couple of inches deep, attract us again and again. We inspect their teeming edges. Life, here, has to hurry to get its work done. While there is water enough it must be born, eat, reproduce, then hibernate or die. Nature is not sentimental. Already the fairy shrimps, shield shrimps, clam shrimps are dying by the million at the shrinking shores of their little seas.

One of our party, an ecologist, finds an extraordinary creature, half an inch long, that looks like an alien's foetus. Even he doesn't know exactly what it is.

You can be walking along with him, engaged in conversation (though, like most naturalists, he's not a big talker), only to realise that he's disappeared. His gaze has registered the flick of a feather where you can see nothing, and off he has gone, muttering something like "Blue bonnet? ..." By the time this trip has ended, he will have recorded 79 species of bird.

He also vanishes into the sandhills - extrapolating, from the tracks he finds, the biodiversity of the dunes. At night, he digs trenches up there to catch the little nocturnal creatures that sometimes fall in.

You realise how veiled your vision is compared with his.

Habitat is the central factor in whether birds and animals can survive. (And people too, ultimately.) This desert country, pristine though it may seem to the untrained eye, is flogged by cattle, and whacked out of kilter by introduced species. Cattle and feral animals have had a devastating effect, but it's been a complex process that scientists are still trying to tease out. Originally, marsupials did well with cattle. So well that they become a 'marsupial menace'. Pastoralists killed tens of thousands of them in huge drives.

The pasture-protection board set up bounties on various other 'vermin'. In the 1880s, the numbers of big kangaroos plummeted but that provided a niche for smaller-sized macropods. Then they too were bountied and killed by the thousands. Rufous rat-kangaroos, bilbies and possums all met the same fate. Later, the pademelon became a 'pest'. In 1918, 70,000 of them were brought in from just one small area. The last was seen here in 1932. It took just 15 years to annihilate a species.

Aboriginal fire regimes were stopped, wiping out certain plant species and causing the deterioration of ground cover. This part of the Simpson hasn't had fire through it for a very long time; there is no evidence of charcoal, no burnt trunks of trees. The spinifex is dying or senescent. Its prickly mass, when vigorous, protects small marsupials from predators. As it gets older, it thins out, like an old man's hair, and so its residents diminish. There are no perennial grasses around, and there is a dearth of any animal bigger than a finger. There was no one left here to burn the country back to life. On the other hand, in the Tanami, where Aboriginal fires were used to clear land of combustible debris, there are now huge lightning-strike bushfires, which burn so hot they destroy species and homogenise ground cover.

Because cattle grazed on certain plants and not on others, the entire desert flora changed. Rabbits were introduced, and competed with native animals for food and shelter. They colonised the underground homes of burrowing rat-kangaroos. Other burrows were cut up by cattle hooves. From south to north, as the cattle came up, waves of extinction occurred.

Cattle are not the only culprits. Marsupials are also disappearing in the Gibson Desert, and along the Canning Stock Route in Western Australia. (I experienced this myself, 30 years ago. Both the Gibson and the old Canning Stock Route were in drought, yet were rich with life. Until I reached the first pastoral fence, after a month of travelling through open country. Then the real desert began - a dust bowl full of dead or dying bullocks, and no ground cover whatsoever except the poisonous turpentine bush. That fence marked the most depressing transition in the whole journey.)

There are very few cattle out in that open country I crossed. So what can be the cause of such rapid decline? It has taken only 20 years to go from a diverse, rich fauna to a very impoverished one. Initially, rabbits were thought to be the major cause. But scientists now believe it is foxes. Where foxes have been baited, rock wallabies have come back.

Further north, however, where extinctions are continuing, there are no foxes, so it can't be entirely them either. There, ghost bats have disappeared. Hopping mice have vanished. Could it be cats? In the end, it cannot be said what, specifically, is causing this rapid deterioration of our inland; only that it's a combination of all of the above, plus droughts, which wipe out the small remaining pockets of fauna that cannot migrate and are left vulnerable to predators.

Birds have fared better. Our ecologist's count of 79 species is pretty good for this country. But we have seen no bustards, few parrots. (The night parrot has famously gone.) Flock pigeon numbers have dropped. We spotted only three emus, running flat out across the horizon. Wherever you looked, cattle and camel tracks spread over the surface of the earth like mycelian webs.

Ten species of marsupial have gone.

Possoms have gone.

Native cats have gone.

Five types of bandicoots have gone.

Burrowing rat-kangaroos have gone.

All these vanished species were food sources for Aboriginal people who, even if they'd been allowed to range freely through their country as they had always done, would have found it difficult to sustain themselves in this new environment.

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Three decades ago, I walked from Alice Springs to the west coast. I went on my own, by camel, and it took me just under a year. Most of that time I was alone. I was totally immersed in my environment. The experience was so powerful and brain-changing that I often feel I have never entirely come back. So it is perhaps unavoidable that the desert of now cannot compete with the desert of then.

What use to me if we see three emus disappearing into the dust, when on the first journey six or seven would often come right into my camp, not ten feet from me, and gawp, not with fear but with stupid and charming

curiosity. Or to hear now the howling of a dingo at night, when dingoes followed me at 50 yards' distance, often for days. Or to see a few surviving marsupial tracks in the sand, when in that other desert they were legion. And birds! I used to know them all but that knowledge has gone, locked in some cranny in the head, beyond retrieval. Reading the night sky so that I always felt safe and at home - that literacy has gone, too, in the mudslide of years. And if there are stories of how Aboriginal people lived here long ago, it isn't the same as walking up a dry watercourse into the shadowy hills with an old Aboriginal man, looking for pituri, while he softly sings his Dreaming. He, too, has gone, along with so many of the old people who remember the old days and ways.

Sometimes, I feel alienated from this secondary, cattle-scarred, orphaned place, and do not want to be here. It is a form of homesickness for a past experience, and for people who have vanished.

But eventually the mood dissipates. This desert belongs to another 'now', so why compare it? This one is worth preserving, worth our efforts to understand it. The previous one is contained in a sliver of time, along with the knowledge I had then and have since replaced with other knowledge. Just as the present owners of the Simpson, descendants of the Wangkangurru ancestors, will make of their inheritance what they can.

Even so, there is a sorrow at the core of Australia, which partly explains the need to conquer, to put down. As Frost wrote of America:

*The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people ...
... we were England's, still colonials,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
Something we were withholding made us weak
Until we found out that it was ourselves ...*

The quietness spreads away from the little group gathered around the fire, some with their hands or backsides turned to it, others mesmerised by the coals inside the flames. From the stupid rush of city life, they have fallen through to a different kind of time, in which it is possible to sit, at sundown, in the rapidly gathering cold, and contemplate the Earth turning towards night. How quiet it is. A bell's ting; the spit and bubble of the fire; a camel shifting its weight, cud rising up a gullet to be chewed again - as pleasurable a habit to the camel as puffing a tobacco pipe is to a man.

It is an elemental scene, and again you think of the actors here before you, warming themselves by their fire, tucked into their sliver of time.
