Cultural Landscapes Symposium
Placing the post in the landscape of memory: revisiting the colonial frontier
Jane Haggis, Department of Sociology, Flinders University

“We are muted by the hegemony of whiteness, which assumes we are not capable of having opinions and it is not our place to speak. We can be spoken about, or to, but never with. My people have never relinquished their sovereignty and I refuse to be silenced.”

Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s potent insistence on aboriginal sovereignty and the right to speak in the matters of ‘nation’ in the quotation above is aimed squarely at hegemonic patriarchal whiteness, specifically Keith Windschuttle’s rebuttal of the ‘black armband’ scripting of the Australian past as a story of colonial conquest and violence. Her refusal to be silenced, however, is not only a strategic challenge to the conservative plotting of Australian history, it also begs the question to what extent rescripting the Australian past in terms of colonial domination, massacre and genocide ruptures colonising discourses of history-making in order to speak “with” Aboriginal people.

Some years ago now, Paul Fox asked “do Australians inhabit a postcolonial world or a landscape of colonial memories?” The question forms for him out of an analysis of the ways in which the orderings of aboriginality and space of the colonial museum continued to haunt Australian cultural imaginaries in the early 1990s. Fox traces how colonial museums ordered their knowledge always in reference to the imperial centre, accomplishing a kind of double colonialism – reinforcing “the European acquisition of space” while ensuring that, for the “former peripheral city of empire … memory exists in and belongs to a system of knowledge created elsewhere”.

It seems to me Fox posed his question to invite a response affirming the colonial quality of Australian social memory generally. However, considering his question in 2005, ‘post’ the debates over race, reconciliation and history that dominated the turn of century, elicits a more uncertain response in me. In the aftermath, the work of social memory is often concerned to redraft imperial knowledge into self-aware narratives of colonial domination and appropriation, albeit in ways that incite new debates over the ‘balance’ between recuperation of indigenous loss and survival and celebration of successful settler-colonial subjects. Do such outcomes unsettle the ‘knowledge from elsewhere’, rescripting landscapes of memory in post-colonial tropes? Are colonial memories always a landscape constructed from the past? Or is the present making new nets of it’s own that make the ‘post’ in the colonial ambiguous or uncertain?

Ghassan Hage has persuasively argued that Australia is “an unfinished Western colonial project as well as a land in a permanent state of decolonisation” where “a national memory or a non-contradictory plurality of memory is impossible” because “the very sides which have fought this colonial war have not melded together into one … there remain two separate communal identities with two separate memories trying to live together in one state”. Thus white protagonists of the ‘memory wars’ are all caught in a colonising moment, wether blindfold or armband, because plotting the past as successful development or as an obligation of recognition and repentance remain apart from the memories of colonisation which turn on survival and resistance.
What are the implications of this for the ways the past is narrated in contemporary Australia?

In her critique of Windschuttle, Aileen Moreton-Robinson reveals how white race privilege operates in his text through the twin claims of superior civilization and moral worth, specifically the virtue of benevolence. Windschuttle re-enacts precisely the imperial discourse of the benevolent civiliser bringing gifts of enlightenment and modernity to the benighted natives, who confirm their backwardness by rejecting or resisting such gifts and by demonstrating insufficient physical stamina in the face of the new. The centrality of virtuous benevolence not only to imperial discourse, but also to the contemporary production of white race privilege is well documented. The goodness of whiteness, while clearly part of dominant configurations of racialised masculinity, has particular effect in relation to constructions of white femininities. The ‘good white woman’ is not only a trope that haunts the annals of British imperialism, it continues to structure both contemporary constructions of middle class femininity and feminist discourses of gender and difference. This paper explores the ways in which whiteness, virtue and gender come together in troubling ways in the social memory of colonialism in contemporary Australia in order to suggest alternative possibilities for speaking ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ or ‘for’ the indigenous historical subject. Drawing on Healy’s conception of social memory as a “network of performances” in which “relationships between past and present are performed”, the paper focuses on the ways in which one colonial ‘memory’ of the frontier, Mrs Christina Smith’s book The Booandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: a Sketch of their Habits, Customs, Legends, and Language is performed in contemporary renderings of the social memory of colonialism.

Christina Smith as Historical Subject

Christina Smith arrived at Rivoli Bay (now Southend) in 1846 with her husband, James, and young children, where they ran a store and mail depot. Originally from Scotland, Christina and James had met and married in Melbourne, the first destination of their emigration. The family soon established a reputation for uncommon tolerance and kindness towards the local Buandig people who were suffering the depredations of a violent settler expansion into their country. Duncan Stewart, Christina’s son by an earlier marriage in Scotland, became fluent in a Buandig dialect, at the age of 14 being appointed as an official interpreter by the South Australian government. Amongst many encounters and adventures retold in Christina Smith’s writings, the story of her walk to Mt. Schank, some fifty miles from Rivoli Bay, accompanied only by two Buandig guides, is indicative of the level of trust developed between the Smiths and the local people on whose land they lived. The Smiths subsequently moved to Mount Gambier in 1855 where James established a school that accepted white and Aboriginal children. After his death in 1864, Christina raised the funds to establish a home and school for the local Buandig people, with herself as matron of the institution. However, the venture failed after a couple of years as the funding dried up and many of the inmates died in a mystery epidemic. In 1880 Christina published a book about the Buandig, intended as a record of a people who by now were few in number and poor in health. Christina died at Mount Gambier in 1893, aged about 80. The book became the repository of all that was known in official history of the Buandig people and their ways of being, and stood as a testimony to their rapid
decline as a consequence of settler colonialism’s depredation, dispossession and disease.¹²

Recently, Christina Smith has assumed a prominence in local representations of the area’s colonial past, as a forthright witness to the racism and violence of the early settlers. A series of books written by her great-grand daughter, Mrs Heather Carthew, a local journalist until her death in 199X, promoted Christina’s historical presence and importance locally. In 1996 the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre was opened in Mount Gambier, placing Christina at the centre of an account of the Buandig pre-colonial history and subsequent disappearance as a society in the face of settler-colonialism.

… and Frontier Memorialist

Christina Smith’s slim volume, as its title indicates, sets out to record the ways of the Buandig as a testimony to their final – presumed inevitable – passing. However, only forty-one pages of a total one hundred and twenty nine are given over to this. The rest of the book documents the rationale and experience of Christina Smith and her family in proselytising the Buandig, told through her own memoirs and the memoirs of various Buandig people who either converted or professed to know the Christian God on their deathbed. A number of the brief accounts are also ‘success’ stories of the Aboriginal children Christina fostered in her own home. This reverses the ordering of the book’s frontispiece, where a secondary title: An Account of the efforts by Mr and Mrs James Smith to Christianize and Civilize them, is in very small type as an ‘Also’. Mrs Smith’s slim volume thus firmly places itself within the missionary genre (indeed, Christina describes herself as a ‘missionary and teacher’ in the Preface to her book). As Amanda Nettlebeck ¹³ has also observed, Mrs Smith’s book constructs the Buandig as an appropriate object for her civilising and Christianising agency as a good white woman. Refuting that strand of settler colonial opinion that held Aboriginal people were too low to be evangelised and civilised, Christina makes a passionate case for the regenerative potential of the Aborigines:

True it is, they do not possess the mental strength and grasp of the average European, but they are capable of a high degree of culture: and their moral and religious nature is not too dead to be revivified by the warmth and elevating power of the religion of Jesus.¹⁴

At the same time, while depicting contact with European ‘colonists’ as the ruin of the Buandig, Christina sleights home agency in this to the misjudgements of the Buandig themselves:

They have generally adopted the worst vices of the superior race, and the results are swift and terrible. Unable to accommodate themselves to their altered conditions of life, they have become more susceptible to disease than before their country was invaded by the white man; and this fact, aided by drink and infanticide, has nearly extinguished the once numerous and fine race of aborigines that peopled this district.¹⁵

Thus the book’s narrative establishes the crucial ‘need’ for her and her husband’s missionary agency, without which there could be no ‘strong sense of duty’, the phrase Christina uses to describe her motivations for writing the book. It is through this
powerful prism of appeal that Christina portrays her time and place, and that of the Buandig.

Mrs Smith begins her account by documenting the terror and fear she feels on settling in Rivoli Bay: “we lived in continual dread of them [blackfellows] coming upon us in the night and murdering us”. Her husband meets the challenge of first contact with tobacco and pipes: teaching a crowd gathered around him “the filthy habit of smoking”, with his baby on his hip, while his fearful wife hangs back at the doorway of their hut with gun in hand and children by her side. Her own engagement with the local people soon becomes more intimate however, as she and her husband negotiated with a widowed father to take over the care of his baby son. This first act of ‘taking in’ is prompted by Mr Smith’s “meditating on the depraved condition of the aborigines”, having come across a burial ceremony in the bush:

“A woman was lying dead on the ground, and an infant, apparently about eleven months old, sucking at her breast, while around were men and women howling, yelling, shrieking, tearing their hair, and plastering themselves over with mud”.

The excess of emotion expressed in ceremony is contrasted with the lack of emotion of the child’s father, who “showed no sorrow at his bereavement” and gave up the child to the Smith’s readily enough, although on condition the child be returned to him when he was grown. This early established a thread that runs through Mrs Smith’s text: the superficial and variable quality of indigenous emotional ranges: the shallow excess of ceremony and the lack of ‘true feeling’ between intimates that are the definitive characteristics of depravity in the eyes of the Smiths. The child, named Nathaniel, lived five months in the care of the Smiths before “He gradually pined away” in Christina’s arms.

However, it is not Mrs Smith’s purpose to portray Aboriginal people as emotionally cold and fickle in all contexts. Her book is intended in part to serve as a rebuttal and indictment of frontier settler attitudes to indigenous people. As she records, other settlers viewed the adoption as an act of “foolishness” - “being so attentive to a little ‘black devil’”. Throughout the book, Mrs Smith is at pains to document and establish that “the natives - even in their wildest state-were not insensible to feelings of humanity: and that, although constantly shot down and exasperated to the last degree by many of the early settlers, they sometimes obeyed (without being taught) the command of the gracious Saviour of all mankind - ‘Do good to them that hate you, who despitefully use you, and persecute you’.”

This prefaces an anecdote in which an ill white stockman alone in the bush is assisted by a Buandig man to safety, as Mrs Smith records: “Gently and patiently did this ‘ferocious cannibal’ help the poor fellow along”, guiding him and feeding him. She ends the story with the rhetorical question: “Who will say, after this, that the natives are utterly depraved, and incapable of being Christianised?”

Reinforcing her arguments for Aboriginal people as capable of religious and civilized 'uplift' are a series of 'Memoirs' of particular individuals who came within the reach of
the Smiths missionary efforts. These narratives document the effect of the Smiths influence - to elicit finer feelings, good conduct and spiritual awakening - in their Bujandik friends. Wergon, also called Peter, was given to the Smiths by his Buandig foster parents when he was a young boy. He soon "won the hearts of all my family", she wrote, as "To conform to our customs, and to make himself agreeable was his chief study ...". She recounts Wergon/Peter's growing up as a series of engagements or encounters between the family, Wergon/Peter and his countrymen. Mrs Smith is fearful he will be enticed away from the family's civilizing influence - an anxiety she feels particularly acutely as she begins to discern a spiritual awakening in him. A conversation initiated by Wergon/Peter about whether his deceased mother might be in hell causes Christina to reflect:

"I observed this dawning of intelligence with anxiety, lest his old companions should entice him away, and these favourable symptoms should be erased from his mind, and perhaps he would be lost to us for ever, as it had happened to us in other instances previously".

Despite one slip, Wergon/Peter proves steadfast, resisting the blandishments of 'friends' to steal a horse or flour by responding "me no steal, because the Big Spirit see me, and be angry with me". Christina's relief is palpable: "When my poor black boy related to me what had passed between them, I felt very great encouragement, and truly my heart rejoiced within me". Wergon/Peter becomes a keen proselytizer to his compatriots, although Mrs Smith is still fearful, even when he is dying of consumption she worries he will "leave us and go away with the other natives" and tests and re-tests his spiritual understanding and commitment before she is finally convinced of his conversion by his concern, even on his deathbed, "for the conversion of those around him; notwithstanding the severity of his sufferings, he would not permit an opportunity to pass unimproved. He would reprove, exhort, and entreat on behalf of that Saviour who was his chief comfort ... with such earnestness as I have seldom seen equalled by any of his more highly favored white brethren."

Her insecurity about the solidity of change in her indigenous charges reflects Mrs Smith's ambivalent view of Buandig culture - on the one hand she is determined to accord them full humanity and as worthy of humane treatment and civilizing effort, on the other, she has a profoundly negative view of their social life and practices: cannibalism, infanticide, and brutality to women are all documented in her book. Women are portrayed as victims of both black and white men's mendacity and violence. Jeanie, who had made fun of Duncan Smith's attempts to preach to her when they were both children, lay dying all alone when Duncan found her in the bush:

"Once me young, strong, good looking; flesh on my bones, white men praise me, take me to their wurlas, give me 'nangroo' (poison). I am too weak to call loud to your god. He can't hear me; He is far above me. Speak for poor Jeaney". Duncan responds, "Jeaney, speak for yourself to Jesus, who died for you; he will hear anyone. He will hear black as well as white, even from the ground". On his return from getting help, he finds her dead, "She died with a smile of peace on her lips".

Mingboaram, named Caroline by white men, a good looking 25 year old when first Mrs Smith meets her, is exchanged by her husband for blankets and 'tucker' from
"whites' at Compton station and subsequently becomes the mother of two 'half caste' daughters. Mingboaram/Caroline angrily rejects Mrs Smith's request to let her bring the children up, saying "she loved hers and would not part with them". Several years later, however, Mingboaram/Caroline is reduced to a physical wreck "me inside burnt with grog" and sends for Mrs Smith to take the girls, “Missie, you look out my children; you send them long-a school … you no let them go with blackfellows" and tells her daughters “My children, Missie will be your mother; do as she tells you … never leave Missie ‘mith-she good one long-a you, Maria, Annie; no more wild”. On her deathbed, Mingboaram/Caroline takes in the message of salvation, “Me no sorry me never get better. Dural (the blacks) beat lubra always - like kill me many times; no husband look out me now - no black woman care for me, only 'marton, marton, white-neer' (good, good, white woman); no like 'nother one white woman, what no care for poor black lubra”. “When Missie come to heaven, look out for me”.

The two girls, Maria, aged 9, and Annie, about 8, are taken literally into the heart of the Smith family, where proximity and influence work their cultural transformation even on little girls “familiar with the vices of drunkenness, swearing, smoking, lying, cursing, and fighting”. The task was not always easy, it would seem, as Christina had to comfort Mr Smith sometimes “by recalling to his memory how strikingly a Divine Providence was exhibited in the mother having been changed as from a savage to a lamb …”. Eight months after their mother’s death, the two girls were baptized. The story ends with Maria successfully established as an accomplished and valued nurse in a “respectable” family who taught her to ride a horse, gave her “handsome earrings” and promised to teach her the piano. Anna “evinced a true missionary spirit, desiring to teach the little black children the only way by which they could become happy and free from the savage habits of their gloomy lives”. Thus Mrs Smith’s influence and efforts produce a similar transformation to that of ‘women’s work’ in other mission fields of empire. The ‘savage’ Buandig is transformed into a ‘good Christian woman’ capable of exerting influence through the good white woman’s example of civilized respectability and active evangelical spirit.

Despite her acknowledgement of Buandig culture and humanness, Christina Smith’s aim is to transform them into something quite different. The accounts of the ‘converts’ which make up the major part of the book produce a uniform representation of integration. They become black Europeans in the sense that they leave their old ‘bad’ ways, language and customs behind for ‘good’ white ways: a Christian respectability through dress, sobriety and work. The ‘half caste’ girls the Smiths fostered are trained in domestic work with the aim of marriage to white men. Another transformation also structures the ‘Memoirs’ of Mrs Smith – that of the deathbed conversion. Along with Wergon/Peter, Jeanie and Mingboaram/Caroline, mentioned above, most of the Buandig people individually named in Mrs Smith’s accounts die, often lingeringly, from consumption, ‘the grog’ or other unspecified diseases, reflecting the traumatic ravages of the frontier. Nearly all of them, to one degree or another, express some kind of comfort in, if not conversion to, the message of love and redemption told them by Mr and Mrs Smith.

In Mrs Smith’s account, the frontier consists of a majority of ‘bad’ white men and a few ‘good’ white women (mainly) and men. The representation of Buandig culture as deeply oppressive to women, occasionally cannibalistic and only too willing to commit infanticide confirms their savagery without necessarily dislodging their status
as fully human and inhabiting ‘culture’. Barbaric but redeemable, the Buandig are caught in a primitive state that cannot deliver the full emotional range of civilised, Christian society. The ‘memoirs’ of conversion thus reiterate time and again the power of love and kindness on individuals who expect neither from black or white. The ability of ‘natives’ to be kind, to love and to care is acknowledged, but always in ways that indicate its limits and privileges the ungrudging warmth of the ‘good’, Christian, European, woman, called ‘mother’ by many of her supplicants. However, as Amanda Nettlebeck has pointed out, enmeshed in these conventions of a colonial discourse is a more disruptive quality about the text. Christina accords the Buandig a respectful status as owners of the land, carefully recording the loving descriptions of their country told to her by such as ‘Jeremy’ or ‘Mary Anne’; likewise, the very act of memorialising individuals “is quite radical in a late colonial culture which most often rendered Indigenous people nameless and generic”.

Mrs Carthew’s Historical Fiction

Heather Carthew wrote about her great-grandmother’s life and role in local history and tourism publications and in two novels based on Christina’s published and unpublished writings and those of her eldest son, Duncan Stewart, who spoke several of the local indigenous dialects. Here I focus on the two novels both of which stay close to Christina and Duncan’s accounts of their adventures and relationships with the local Indigenous people they befriend, but invest them with a sense of drama and emotion.

Twisted Reeds, the earliest of the two novels, depicts the initial two years of the Smiths sojourn at Rivoli Bay, their first home in the region. The story turns around the relationships the family, but particularly Christina, forge with the local Buandig groups as well as with the white residents of the district. The dramatic interest however, figures around the character of Donnelly, an escaped convict, with whom Christina forms a kind of friendship, despite the gap of gender, class, and respectability. Donnelly’s unstable character (implicitly aggravated by his inhuman treatment as a convict) finally leads him to become the first white man hanged for murdering an Aboriginal in South Australia. Out of his tragic, and possibly false, conviction, the story implies, a blow has nevertheless been struck against the injustices of the frontier, where previously white men shot Aboriginal people with impunity. Despite this positive gloss, Donnelly’s crime is a very personal blow to Christina’s sense of her religious mission:

“She had tried to reach his fears with an understanding hand, to guide them from his tortured mind, to expose them for constructive examination. But, now she knew she had failed.

‘Surely, James’, she said. ‘Surely, we could have found words to touch those hidden fires with the coolness of reason – but we didn’t – at the time when they were most needed’. …”

The news of Donnelly’s hanging, the story implies, brings on the premature birth of Christina’s second daughter, Mercy, indicating the depth of Christina’s investment in her relationship with the man.
Twisted Reeds portrays the Smiths, and particularly Christina, as a sympathetic, brave and determinedly ‘good’ woman, deeply religious and committed to the struggle against frontier barbarism, black or white. Duncan Stewart, her elder son, is the ‘interpreter’, literally and figuratively. Through his youthful friendships, most notably with the Buandig boy, Wergon, and his increasing fluency in the local language, Duncan is portrayed as Christina’s eyes, ears and interpretive guide into local Indigenous culture and character. However, the boy’s familiarity with Wergon and his people are firmly caught in a trope of bringing knowledge, not gaining it. Christina occasionally worries that Duncan is tending to see the ‘other’ side too favorably and regularly affirms his role as transmitter of civilizing Christianity to the Buandig. White society is depicted as a radical dichotomy between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’. The ‘good’ are those who are religious, (usually) educated, and respectable, who wish to protect and civilize the Aboriginal population and give a degree of recognition to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The Smiths are the principal members of this category, but several of the large station owners are sympathetic to the efforts of Christina, especially. The ‘bad’ are (usually) lower class, irreligious drunkards and ex-convicts. This class distinction, however, is ameliorated a little by the allocation of blame to the convict system, held responsible for the brutalizing of its human charges. On release, their characters made venal and cynical, such men view Aboriginal people as less than human and stereotype them as murderous, thieving and untrustworthy. In the novel, Buandig society is portrayed as violent and cruel to women, and often callous, yet quite child-like in its ‘primitive savagery’. The dominant theme is that Aboriginal people, on the basis of a shared humanity, must be accorded equality before the law, not in terms of an active citizenship but in terms of protection: from the ‘bad’ whites and from their ‘savage’ selves. The story ends with Christina’s son, Duncan, being appointed by the Protector of Aborigines, who has become a friend of the family, as official interpreter for the Buandig, thus affirming the Smith family’s role in benevolent colonialism, as James Smith explains to Christina in the closing pages of the book:

“Matthew has been closely observing his [Duncan’s] relationship with tribal members over the past few months. As Protector for the aborigines and a Justice of the Peace, Matthew is most anxious to promote understanding between the aborigines and the new settlers. He considers that Duncan – with our assistance – can play an important role in this district”.

Reeds in the Wind, the second novel, is more episodic in form with less dramatic invention than the first book. It takes up the story from where Twisted Reeds leaves off, documenting the remaining years of the family’s stay in Rivoli Bay. The focus is more narrowly on the inner life of the family, particularly Christina, James and Duncan, as a vehicle for Mrs Carthew to imagine the emotional ups and downs of pioneer life. Social isolation, hard domestic labour, frequent pregnancies and the trials of parenting in a frontier outpost of civilization structure the characterisation of Christina, who is portrayed as a woman of deep sensibility and commitment, often struggling with depression in the face of a harsh and lonely social environment. The relationships Christina and her family forge with the Buandig are central to the story; this time however, they are portrayed through a more overt discourse of development and progress which ultimately leaves no space for the Buandig.
The main Buandig character in the book is again Wergon, but this time the emphasis is less on Wergon as ‘native informant’ for Duncan and more on the boy himself as object of the civilizing mission. Wergon’s conversion to Christianity and apparent eagerness to encourage his fellows to do likewise, or at least learn ways of living from the Smiths, inspires James with a plan to send Wergon to the Aboriginal school in Adelaide run by the Protector, Matthew. Christina is less sure it is the right path to take, asking her son Duncan “Are we doing the right thing? Should we be sending Wergon to the school in Adelaide?” 40 Duncan’s response emphasises Mr Smith’s overt desire to “turn him [Wergon] into a black missionary who’ll convert the tribe for him”. 41 While Christina goes along with her husband’s plan, this exchange works to distance her from its disastrous results. Wergon runs away from the school, spending many months walking back to his country, eventually arriving at Rivoli Bay dying from consumption. Christina expresses her grief to James, “We all loved that boy so much. Not only our family but his tribal members as well,” she whispered. “There was a role ahead for him with his people. But we sent him away, James – we sent him away …” 42 Later in the exchange she expresses her doubts more directly: “We believe we answered a call to this place, James, but what are we doing for these people? What can we do to help them overcome their inherited physical weaknesses? What can we do to strengthen their resistance to our introduced diseases? What can we do to help them adjust to the changes we’re forcing on them?” 43

Again James is given the ‘hard’ voice of civilizing zeal, lauding the proselytizing energy Wergon brings even to his death bed, and strongly refuting Christina’s sense of failure with a protest of faith: “‘No! No, Christina! You must never think that. Wergon is following a chosen path, even though the direction may be obscure to us’.”

The story ends optimistically, with the promise of new developments at Rivoli Bay with the planned opening of a ‘boiling down works’ that would expand the settlement into a viable port. Only Christina asks “But what’s being done for the Booandiks? What’s their future in their tribal lands?”

Heather Carthew’s fiction develops the duality of her great grandmother’s account in interesting ways. Some of the disruptive elements of Christina’s text are picked up and enhanced to round out the characterisation of Christina as a powerful advocate for the humanity of the Buandig and their status as owners of the land. Both novels amplify Christina’s strident case against white frontier racism and violence but do so by drawing frontier society much more sharply as a binary of gender and class as well as race. While Christina’s text depicts her marriage with James as a shared missionary partnership, Heather Carthew draws an acute distinction between her great grandfather and mother. James carries the negative burden of missionary zeal that qualifies his empathy with the Buandig – Christina does not dispute Duncan’s accusation that James is more concerned with winning souls than Wergon’s personal well-being or cultural integrity. It is Christina who is accorded empathy and reflexivity thus saving the good white woman from the harsher judgements of contemporary revisionism.

Despite Christina’s passionate self questioning about “what are we doing”, however, both books, but especially Reeds in the Wind, ultimately replicate one of the central
canards of Australian colonial racism: that indigenous Australians had no place in, were indeed incapable of adapting to, the rigours of colonial modernity, and would not survive. The novels draw a picture of two incompatible worlds: the indigenous and the settler, inhabiting the same physical space. The world of the Buandig is that of nature, the wonderfully rich waterscapes of the pre-drainage Southeast. No doubt building on her own intimate appreciation of the remnant scrub in the area around Rendelsham and Southend where she spent most of her life, Heather Carthew builds evocative word pictures of the swamplands, within which the Buandig are naturalized as expert, swift moving people of the reeds. Entry into the settler world is ultimately pathological for the Buandig, even the civilizing mission ends up killing Wergon. Only Christina and, especially, Duncan are able to move between the two worlds. Other white settlers enter the Buandig world with fear and suspicion and reap the rewards - harassment and even death. Ultimately, as the ending of *Reeds in the Wind* implies, development triumphs, imbuing the descriptions of the Buandig world with a nostalgic romanticism.

**The Lady Nelson Discovery Centre**

Opened in 1996, the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre is an imaginative local government-funded attempt to explore the pre-history and history of the Mount Gambier region to the time of first European contact. The Centre charts a path through the area’s fascinating geological history to the presence of the Buandig, the first nation of the region, the destruction of their society, and, finally to a facsimile of the Lady Nelson, the British boat from which Mount Gambier was sighted and named by Lt. James Grant in 1800. The organization of the Centre ensures that visitors first pass through the Ancient Wetlands board-walk at the rear of the main building. On re-entering the Centre, one is guided through a corridor in which the pre-history of the region, including geology, flora and fauna is presented in a mixture of interactive and static visual and textual displays. The Indigenous presence is introduced and integrated with this natural history through the display of facsimiles of early cave art and other evidence establishing the longevity of Aboriginal people inhabiting the land. However, this is saved from the colonizing cliché of naturalizing ‘the other’ by the prominent display of a time line that locates the natural and human history of the region in terms of world historical landmarks. The Buandig and notable events from their historical memory, such as the volcanic eruptions which shaped Mount Gambier’s immediate geography, are placed on a time line that also marks the birth of Buddha and other significant aspects of non-European histories. The relativist point that European history is simply one history among many, and not necessarily the longest or most significant, is reinforced by the very obvious late entry of the iconic markers of white European civilization, such as the birth of Christ, in comparison. The relativism continues in efforts to bring indigenous and non-indigenous culture into a technological equivalence; a panel describes the “Maramin” method of cooking Emu in a stone oven in which steam is released through the bird’s protruding beak. A peep hole titled “Sneak a look. See how good ideas are copied today” brings in view a contemporary pie funnel in the image of a black bird.

Colonization is introduced through three parallel panels which in turn provide accounts of Aboriginal and European ‘first sightings’ of each other, the former drawn from vignettes in Mrs. Smith’s book. Nearby, another panel asks ‘Two Sides to Every
Story?’ and consists of quotations from early settlers, including Mrs. Smith, giving contradictory assessments of the Buandig as fine if treated well or “troublesome natives”. A quotation from a report by James Smith to the Protector of Aborigines in April 1851 makes the point that most of the Buandig are “usefully employed by the settlers”, a claim backed up by a quote from Mr. Leake (one of the largest early landholders) that he was running 18,000 sheep with a workforce of ‘native’ shepherds. The story is continued in the form of the ‘spectra vision theatre’ located in a small, cave-like room (indeed the back wall has large reproductions of geological formations from the area on display). A mockup of a bark hut encloses a room with the three props of colonial conquest prominently displayed: a gun, a bottle of alcohol and a bible, alongside aboriginal implements. Centered within this frame is a medium-sized glass display case in which are a photograph of a European woman and aboriginal people in European clothes alongside features of European culture: books, pens, a candle and the like. Triggered by entry, the show starts. A figure steps out of the photograph dressed in a long white cloak and veil, no face visible. A male voice sets the scene, introducing the white figure as Christina Smith a “remarkable woman” despite “unwittingly” assisting in the destruction of the traditional values and structures of Buandig life through her Christian zeal to educate and convert. Christina is then presented to tell her story “in her own words”. A female voice takes over as the veiled figure moves centre stage.

Christina’s ‘story’ is told by the veiled figure through lengthy extracts from the 1880 book. The voice over begins with Christina’s own preface of herself as a ‘humble servant of the Lord’ who wrote the book out of a “strong sense of duty” to the Buandig who were aware of their own passing and requested not to be forgotten. The first part of the ‘theatre’ reiterates the Buandig accounts of first contact with Europeans and their animals, recounting in an emotive voice the speed with which contact degenerated into ‘savage’ European retaliation for hunting stock: “Aborigines were hunted and shot like dogs”. Christina’s refutation of the European view that Aborigines couldn’t be civilized is reiterated as is her analysis of the pathological nature of Buandig contact with Europeans – vice, disease and drink being the cause of Buandig near extinction. The second half of the soliloquy focuses on Buandig social structure and cultural practices, particularly the status and treatment of women, culminating in a shocked voice describing the uncarig treatment meted out to women in child birth and pleading for better treatment of women. Rigid custom must give way to humanitarian care and concern. The show ends with the story of the deathbed conversion of ‘Short Billy’ in Christina’s home for Aborigines in Mt. Gambier in December 1867. Accompanied by a poignant musical backdrop, the voice recites Billy’s final words:

“Christ all day
Christ all night
Make me right.

She holds my hand and prays”

On leaving the theatre a panel titled ‘Diseases of Dispossession?’ contextualises Billy’s demise with more quotes from Christina’s book describing the rate and nature of Buandig deaths from ‘sickness’, consumption, drunken fights and infants who “fell asleep in Jesus” as a result of unknown ailments. This is, however, followed by a panel “Aboriginal People Survive” acknowledging cultural continuity and identity in
the presence of many Narrinyeri people in the Mt. Gambier district “although there are no more direct descendents of the Booandik (Bungaritj or Buandik) people today”.

**Conclusion**

Christina’s self-presentation in her book is, of course, hardly controversial as a product of nineteenth-century evangelical sensibilities of the ‘civilising mission’. Her text seems somewhat less conventional in terms of the norms of the Australian colonial frontier, in its conviction of Aboriginal humanity and its strident opposition to racist violence and Indigenous degradation. Although as Henry Reynolds’ work indicates, there were always white colonisers who resisted elements of racist ideologies, policies and practices towards Indigenous people. Important amongst these was the strand of religious discourse that included Aboriginal people in a common humanity in order to argue for their assimilation into ‘civilised’ society. However, the underside of this was to justify the removal of children, particularly those identified as ‘half caste’, from Aboriginal homes and communities in order to more fully absorb them into civilised society. Mrs Smith’s ‘memoirs’ provide early examples of such practices under the guise of ‘saving’ the little ones from the dangers of indigenous savagery and white male depravity.

Amanda Nettlebeck brings out the complexity of Christina Smith’s legacy in her “texted history” of the incorporation of Christina into the heroic tropes of the pioneer legend being constructed at the time of her death in 1893. This clearly strong and determined person is rendered “a lady of delicate physique, and by no means robust constitution” in order to accentuate both her femininity and her heroism. At the same time “the extent to which she did, within the terms available to her, remember Indigenous individuals and vocally criticise real acts of settler violence during South Australia’s frontier years” is ignored, as is the degree of respect she accorded the Buandig as rightful owners of the land. This is not to ignore the ways in which Christina Smith’s text is complicit in the conventionalities of colonising discourse. Nettlebeck attends to the colonial quality of Smith’s ethnography, re-reading her narrative to reveal the instabilities of power embedded in Mrs Smith’s missionary endeavours and the ways in which the Buandig resisted and challenged the civilizing intent of the Smiths. Alongside the depiction of Wergon as the “exemplary colonised subject” are other indigenous subjects “with their hoots of laughter, their incredulity, their ‘yells of ridicule or disapprobation’”. However, an indigenous agency is also, I think, at work in the apparently compliant figures of Wergon or ‘Short Billy’ or the other dozen or so individuals memorialised by Christina.

Throughout the Memoirs, Christina reveals the acute Boandik awareness of white settler racist attitudes. Pendowr and Calluin, her guides on her journey from Rivoli Bay to Mt Schank, “received me with shouts of laughter. ‘What white people say when they hear you travel with drual, you white lady?’” The same guides tell her of their violent treatment at the hands of white settlers. Wergon/Peter goes on an evangelizing journey to the ‘Wattatonga’ people, only to return with a youthful survivor of a massacre perpetrated by settlers, little wonder that she records Wergon/Peter’s depression at settler racism. Boondun, a member of the Rivoli Bay people, was, Christina records, “the sole survivor of his family:” when he died in 1867. He used her, she writes, as “registrar of deaths which occurred in his tribe.” Every year he furnished me with the names of individuals who had died in the
meanwhile, and sometimes would observe, with a sigh, ‘By-and bye no more; all die; no more young women grow up’”. As well as demonstrating the Buandig determination to make use of Smith to record the awful devastations of colonial dispossession and conquest for them, it surely inflects how we interpret the death bed conversions in the Memoirs. Most die without the comforts of kin or ceremony — like ‘Bobby’, who told Christina “nearly all his friends were dead, and that I was his sister … I told him, putting my hand beside his swarthy ones, that there would, in heaven, be no distinction of race and colour. ‘Oh! Yes, oh! Yes, he ejaculated, …. Bobby said, ‘Me soon go to that one ‘good place’, and a cheering response rose from each one present’. It seems to me we have to at least acknowledge the potential power of Smiths’ message – of heaven as a place beyond racism and cruelty, where old friends might be reunited - to a people suffering such a terrible destruction. This adds a poignancy and emotional power to Smith’s book today.

Where Christina Smith’s text becomes controversial today is in how her nineteenth century narrative is re-presented in contemporary representations of the colonial past. Her life and work is now celebrated in local social memory, in part because it is through her recollections that the Buandig people achieve a visibility. Christina Smith, as she is (re)presented in the Discovery Centre and the writings of Heather Carthew, stands in for the (no longer) Indigenous presence. Christina’s evangelical construction of the Buandig is established as an authentic rendition of pre-contact culture. Their subsequent demise is narrated in terms of the Indigenous victims of a relentless, white, largely male, violent colonialism in which their own underdeveloped moral and spiritual ethos ensured a pathological response: drink and infanticide. At the same time, Christina Smith’s white female goodness— as ghostly/ saintly laser image in the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre, or as (slightly) stroppy, determined fighter for social justice, in her great-grand daughter’s novels, softens the violence of disappearance and dispossession with her benevolent agency. Christina’s presence feminises the stories of colonial conquest, in so doing, providing white memories a softer option than complicity in violent destruction: the good white woman upholding the ‘true’ values of civilised, European society.

5 Put in refs to civilising mission of British imperialism and re whiteness: Dyer; Haggis & Schech; Riggs; Moreton-Robinson.
6 Put in refs to white women and colonialism
7 Insert reference to Haggis and Schech & other feminist lit.
8 Chris Healy From the Ruins of Colonialism. History as Social Memory, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 5
9 Mrs Smith’s text qualifies as a ‘memory’ in that it records her memory of her past experiences of the initial European settlement of the lower Southeast of South Australia and the engagements with the first nation peoples who inhabited the region.
Except where directly quoting from historical texts, I adopt the spelling for the Indigenous word from the Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia, Buandig rather than Christina’s rendering of Booandik.

Mrs James Smith The Booandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: A Sketch of Their Habits, Customs, Legends and Language. Also An Account of the efforts made by Mr and Mrs James Smith to Christianise and Civilise them, Adelaide, 1880 Reprinted by PaperWorks, Naracoorte, 2001

This account of Christina Smith and her family is distilled from the following secondary sources: Heather Carthew Rivoli Bay: a Story of Early Settlement at Rivoli Bay in the South East of South Australia, 1845, Rendelsham, 1974; Heather Carthew ed. Sunlight Across the Swamplands: Women’s Role in 150 Years of Settlement in the Millicent District in the Lower South East of South Australia, Millicent, c. 1994; Pam O’Connor Second to None: The Story of the Pioneers of Rural Mount Gambier, Mt. Gambier 1988.


Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.33
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.37
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.38
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.39
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.39
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.42
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.43
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.48
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.57
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.38
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.74
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.85
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.86
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, pp. 86-87
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.87
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.89
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.94
Smith, The Booandik Tribe, p.96

Put in refs to making good Xn women: Haggis; Margie etc.

Nettlebeck, Australian Feminist Studies, p. 86

Carthew, Twisted Reeds, p. 244

Find quote …

Carthew, Twisted Reeds, p. 273

Carthew, Reeds in the Wind, p. 240

Carthew, Reeds in the Wind, p. 240

Carthew, Reeds in the Wind, p. 276

Carthew, Reeds in the Wind, p. 277

Carthew, Reeds in the Wind, p. 278

Carthew, Reeds in the Wind, p. 279

When I first visited the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre in the summer of 2000, the Centre’s story line stopped with the sighting of Mt. Gambier by Lt. Grant. On revisiting the Centre in 2005, the story had been broadened somewhat to include coverage of later settler history around the development of a pastoralist industry and forestry. In addition a display of a large poster size book titled “Meet some of our people” contains potted biographies of notables from the days of first settlement to the present, including Christina Smith, Father Tennyson Wood and Sir Robert Helpman. This extends to including the biographies of four indigenous people, the late Mr Lindsay Wilson, Mrs Dulcie Wilson, and Ms Eunice Saunders, founder of the Southeast Nungas Club. The only historical figure is Lanky Kana, who died at Beachport in 1898 and is recorded in the exhibit as having “the tragic distinction of being the last full blooded member of the Buandik (Booandik) people”. The planned research project this paper forms an early part of, intends to explore how the Lady Nelson Discovery Centre came about and how and why its story line has changed over this period.

No explanation is given in the panel of who the ‘Marimin’ are and I haven’t tried identifying the name yet.
The descriptions of pre contact indigenous life and technology do not rely on local sources alone. An origin story, ‘A Seajourney to the other end of the world’ is attributed to ‘Wandjuk Marika, NT Aborignal elder’. Another panel, ‘Aboriginal life – Abundant food’ consists of a quote attributed to Albert Karloan 1864-1943, b. Pt. McLeay and a list of foods ‘on the menu’ of ‘The Yaraldi of the Murray River and Lakes of South Australia, referenced to Ronald and Catherine Berndt, 1993. A photograph in the same display is of a contemporary indigenous man collecting seafood on a beach. No indication of who the person is or where the photograph was taken is given.

Find rest of quote from Christina’s book

Henry Reynolds This Whispering in Our Hearts Allen & Unwin 1998


Nettlebeck, Australian Feminist Studies, pp.88-89

Nettlebeck, Australian Feminist Studies, p. 86

Smith, The Booandik Tribe p.40

Smith, The Booandik Tribe p.41

Smith, The Booandik Tribe pp. 62-63

Smith, The Booandik Tribe p.113

Smith, The Booandik Tribe p.114

Smith, The Booandik Tribe p.111