‘Doing’ history and ‘Understanding’ Cultural Landscapes: Cutting Through South Australia’s Woakwine Range

2005 Understanding Cultural Landscapes symposium: paper by Carol Fort, Department of History, Flinders University of South Australia

Abstract
Before the influx of European settlers, which began in the 1830s, South Australia’s South East was home to several Aboriginal groups, including the Boandik and the Meintangk, that ranged widely across a paradise of wetlands, ephemeral lakes and swamps adding fish and plant roots to their rich diet. This abundant surface water, such a boon to indigenous people, was anathema to settlers. They immediately began to drain the land.

The subject of this paper is the drainage landscape of the Woakwine Range and its surrounding flats. The paper takes three time-slices through the landscape (as European incursions began, around the turn of the twentieth century, and the early 1960s) and subjects their water control strategies to a comparative analysis that considers historical and cultural indications gleaned from archaeological data, letters and diaries, newspapers, interviews, photographs, films and government records.

Central to the paper’s purpose is the question: what can historians learn about social organization from examining the cultural landscape of water control strategies? The paper argues that the three time-slice examples indicate several differences in social organization in the region: not only differences in the political forms, roles, responsibilities and attitudes, and the expected differences in environmental knowledge, appreciation and/or interpretation, but also, significant differences in people’s perception of themselves and each other, both as individuals and as social beings. The paper concludes that the time slice landscapes function as pivotal lynchpins around which to focus historical investigation and analysis, deeply rooting it in the land.

Introduction
South Australia’s lower south east landscape reflects its distinctive geology and this remains startlingly visible in the study landscape. Forty million years of marine sedimentation created a limestone penplane now deeply infiltrated by confined and unconfined aquifers. Periodic climate changes (including glaciation) have caused the generally retreating sea level to rise and fall, leaving several proud stands of stranded coastal dunes lying roughly parallel to the current coastline on a north-westerly to south-easterly axis. The Woakwine Range is the most westerly of these, lying just behind the coastal lakes and extending from Cape Jaffa to the north of Robe to Lake Bonney, near Millicent. Its highest peaks reach about 50 metres but, in the main, its height rolls at an easy 25 to 40 metres. Pre-drainage surface water moved gradually westward across the inter-dune flats until, trapped against the landward dune faces, the flow pooled in swamps and wetlands and either evaporated, seeped under the ranges or was diverted to the northwest, sometimes as a raging torrent. Looking down from the Woakwine Range to the coastal margin between the towns of Robe and Beachport, surface waters meet the unconfined aquifer, forming coastal lakes and ponds.

To European eyes, water moved strangely over this land. A few well-defined streams flowed from the Naracoorte Ranges in the east but soon petered out in the flat plains. Despite the lack of obvious watercourses, frequent and often extensive flooding and inundation interfered with the settlers’ farming ambitions and stymied any hope of developing the area because it washed out organised transport and communication. These settlers came from a culture where water control, either irrigation or drainage, had been a commonplace sign of ‘civilization’ since their pre-history. They set about dominating the erratic flows and draining the snake-infested flood liable swamps.

This paper analyses water control strategies in the Woakwine Range and its associated flats at the point of three time-slices. The methods of time-slices and understanding cultural landscapes are employed to avoid the tendency of drainage histories to note the cumulation of
drains and other water controls as a story of development or growth – a story in which more and more drains have produced more and more agricultural land, described as ‘reclaimed’. Reclaimed from what? Two subtexts underpin such celebratory narratives, inevitability and order. The increased drainage was the self-evident ‘right path’ and the heroes are the water controllers (whoever they are). The landscape of drainage seems to reflect the triumph of order over chaos, of civilization over barbarity but, as these time-slices show, that implication silences any dissenting voices and hides alternatives. Perhaps even more significantly, the implication hides the drains’ tendency to, not only reflect an order, but to impose an order. This is becoming increasingly significant as our world realises that water shortage is more life denying than shortage of commodities like oil and that water controls often contribute to shortage or declining quality. In South Australia’s South East drainage transfers pollutants and disease, contributes to flooding in some areas and salinity problems in others, and continually discharges an unknown amount of potentially potable water into ecologically fragile wetlands and salt lakes or simply out to sea. Many see this as wasted.

This paper begins from a major premise – that the life world of a community can be explored through the natural and cultural life of its water. I assume that water control strategies derive from historical conditions and circumstances and are never inevitable – that they are always the product of choice. That means that choices and the ways they are arrived at demonstrate not only cultural activity but cultural values as well. My time slices have rather ragged edges and are three vignettes of water control rather than three surgical cuts or photographic representations. That said, while much of the historical and metaphorical meaning might be invisible in some senses, especially in the case of slice one which examines water control at the time of the earliest European incursions, two of them are actual as well as metaphorical cuts into the landscape. Drain L and its Kangaroo Hill Cutting constructed in the early twentieth century and Murray McCourt’s early-1960s Woakwine Cutting slice through the Woakwine Range carrying two of only three visible watercourses in this Robe to Beachport section – the third is Drain M, chronologically, environmentally and politically similar to Drain L and treated only in passing. The two cuttings are dramatically deep, long-term inscriptions on the landscape, monuments speaking of power. Further, both are equipped with a lookout. They are self-consciously landscaped in the sense that each invites observation and interpretation.
Map 1: South Australian coastline from Guichen Bay to Rivoli Bay. Note the salt Lakes Eliza, St Clair and George behind the coastal dunes. The Woakwine Range, a fossilised dune ridge, lies on their landward (eastern) side. Drain L is marked on the map and can be seen crossing Lake Hawdon, cutting through the Woakwine Range at the Woakwine Conservation Reserve and entering the sea near Robe. The lookout is marked in the Range behind Robe. Murray McCourt's Woakwine Cutting is un-named on the map but his private drain system can be seen draining the inland Woakwine Swamp on his property, cutting through the Range and entering Lake George near point BM3.
SLICE ONE: A LANDSCAPE OF INDIGENOUS FEATURES

Abundant cave art in the form of finger flutings and engravings near Mount Gambier, the south east’s administrative centre, is evidence that the larger South East region has known human settlement for at least 30,000 years but the coastal landforms of the current study were created only 7000 to 8000 years ago by rising sea levels. A South Australia’s Department for Environment and Heritage report cites archaeologist R.A. Luebbers (1978) who dated coastal occupation between Robe and Cape Banks from at least 5800 years BP. At the time of European settlement, several Indigenous groups ranged across distinctive territories. The Meintangk people may have used some part of the landscape under analysis. According to Tindale (1974) and Watson (2002) Meintangk boundaries extended from Granite Rocks in Lacepede Bay (19 miles north of Kingston) southward along the coast to Cape Jaffa and east to Lucindale and Naracoorte, extending inland as far as Mosquito Creek and Lake Hawdon. The Boandik peoples, described by Christina Smith, a missionary with well-known interests in the ‘Booandik’, as the most powerful group, certainly lived in the southernmost, coastal and most watery parts of the South East landscape. Ethnographer Norman Tindale described their boundaries as running south from the promontory at Cape Jaffa, continuing eastward on a line between Penola and Naracoorte (abutting the Meintangk) to the west flanks of the Grampian Mountains in Victoria, and then turning west to take in the areas now occupied by Mount Gambier, Penola and Robe.

Smith described their territory as extending from Rivoli Bay (near Beachport) south along the coast to the Glenelg River and extending inland by about 30 miles. Other contemporary accounts (especially Stewart) tend to agree with her. This leaves a little over 20 kilometres of coastline under dispute. Did Boandik or Meintangk occupy the area between Cape Jaffa and Rivoli Bay? More particularly, who occupied the Woakwine Range? It seems likely that Meintangk occupied the northern section and this is certainly the conclusion of the state Department for Environment and Heritage in its Woakwine Conservation Reserve Management Plan (2000).

In April and May of 1844, an official party, led by governor Grey and including experienced surveyors, Bonney and Burr and several armed police made the first overland journey from Adelaide to the Mount Gambier region. Grey’s intention was to inspect the land with a view to selling it and to visit the squatting pastoralists who were running stock they had brought in from the eastern colonies on reputedly good pasture in South Australia’s south eastern extremity. Historians are lucky that George French Angas, an artist and diarist, accompanied the party and included an important word and picture account in his Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand (1847). Although they were not the first Europeans in these lands, Angas’ is one of the earliest written descriptions of the area and certainly the first to make any more than a cursory reference to its indigenous inhabitants.

Fear of Aboriginal violence kept Angas’ companions on the lookout but a side benefit of their vigilance is that his diary contains several references to population density. Coming through the upper South East, Angas remarked several times on the scarce indigenous presence. At Lake Alexandrina he was told that ‘before the whites came to South Australia ... [smallpox] came down the Murray, spreading its ravages from tribe to tribe [and] whole tribes were cut off by its destructive effects’. On arriving at Lacepede Bay at the southern end of the Coorong, the diary records ‘no native wells were observable, nor had we met with any traces of inhabitants for several days along these dreary shores’ but, on nearing the Woakwine Range, the situation changed. ‘On these plains’, wrote Angas, ‘we met with many tracks of the natives.’ The expeditioners saw, not only tracks, but also signs of social organization. Numerous old encampments comprising ‘deserted wirlies’ and heaps of banksia cones – from which the Aboriginal people extracted a sweet beverage – indicated a relatively plentiful population, living in semi-permanent homes and combining their effort in food production. From Mount Benson at

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1 GEORGE FRENCH ANGAS Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand (1847) Smith, Elder and Co., London: X.
2 ibid: 148.
3 Ibid: 149, 150.
the northern end of the Woakwine Range, the full extent of the Range’s indigenous population became apparent:

We collected together a quantity of dry wood and made a signal-fire that must have been visible for many miles. It was soon responded to by the natives towards the south and east, many columns of smoke rising in that direction; and before we descended the hill, the natives were signaling all around, giving indications of a larger population amongst these banksia woods than we had anticipated.\(^4\)

Despite the evidence of a large population, governor Grey’s party rarely saw groups of more than two to five or so. On occasions when they came across large indigenous camps, the camps all ran away leaving cooking fires, tents and belongings for avid examination by the curious settlers. Presumably, if smaller camps existed, they were more effectively hidden and smaller groups could take cover when hearing the approaching explorers.

In 1943 the anthropologists Campbell and Noone wrote ‘our knowledge of the social and material culture of the Buandik people – who occupied most of the South-East – is exceedingly scant’. If that was true of the Boandik, who received extensive attention from Christina Smith and her son Duncan Stewart, it was even truer of the Meintangk who had to wait for Irene Watson’s 2002 account. A few years later, Campbell’s team remarked: ‘little has been recorded of the life of the Buandik tribe who occupied this region and became extinct at the end of the last century’.\(^5\) These days, although we respect Lanky Kana, a Boandik man from the Wilchum mob who died in 1904 and who has long been remembered as the last of the Boandik, we also acknowledge that people who count themselves as Boandik and Meintangk are still living in South Australia. Nevertheless, even though they are not extinct, none lives a traditional, pre-settlement life. Their culture is invisible in the Woakwine landscape, if not actually (for several unused living sites remain) then symbolically. This means that historians who want indications of Boandik social organization must seek it by extrapolating from signs and traces imperfectly preserved or from other forms of evidence created by the settler culture. The old whaling town of Beachport, situated on the coastal heartland of Boandik territory, offers nothing but Lanky’s grave in its cemetery and an unreadable collection of Aboriginal artefacts without provenance. These relics, divorced from the landscape, have nothing to say about Boandik.

**Water control**

That said, what does the landscape tell us about Aboriginal water control in the area? Abundant evidence indicates that the Boandik used water both as a source of food (that grew in the water) and as a site at which to catch food (that was attracted to the water). In other words, that water was a site around which the Boandik organized their culture. The real question for this analysis is: can an historian see evidence that Boandik culture controlled the water? I argue that, yes, there is evidence of Boandik using direct water control strategies to produce food but, more than that, I contend that deliberately using inherent characteristics of the water – such as flow or depth – to increase food production is a water control strategy in itself. On an even more general level, I assert that, subject to climatic conditions, Boandik had absolute control over their environmental water. Rain in the territory is predominantly a winter phenomenon, which results in distinct wet and dry seasons, and the Boandik controlled the amount of surface water in their living environment by migration, by choosing where to live. This is harder to read in the landscape than brick or concrete dams, canals or weirs would be, but nevertheless, can be demonstrated by examining old living sites. For those who would prefer to see signs of construction before

\(^4\) Ibid. 150, 151.

agreeing the indigenous peoples controlled water, Angas offers some tantalising glimpses of organized food production.

The most significant food that came from controlling water was water itself. Water production was controlled by effort, special techniques (digging) and by knowledge. Angas’ diary recounts an episode in which five indigenous men (met in the swamp between the Woakwine Range and Lake Hawdon) demonstrated this:

Mason [one of the party’s police guard] at length succeeded in persuading them to come up to us, as we were most anxious to find water, and they showed us a place in the swamp where after digging about nine feet, muddy water was obtained; the cattle and the horses were exceedingly thirsty, and almost jumped into the well, having been two days without a drop of water.6

Digging a nine-foot well wide enough for horses to drink from is a deliberate water control strategy. Local Aboriginal people also built extensive weirs to trap fish, observed by Angas on two different sites. ‘On some of the swamps’, he wrote,

The natives had built weirs of mud, like a dam wall, extending across from side to side, for the purpose of taking the small mucilaginous fishes that abound in the water when these swamps are flooded.7

Joseph Hawdon, who travelled from Melbourne to Adelaide in 1839, also remarked on dams in Lake Hawdon (named for him by Charles Bonney):

The remainder of our day’s journey was over plains evidently at times under water; and from the dams made by the natives it appears that they are in the habit of catching fish here in certain seasons.8

Hawdon’s picture is of long-term water control constructions designed for continued use. Angas reported that shellfish and aquatic beetles, ‘which here form an article of food’, were gathered directly from the water but also noted that water functioned to enhance non-water food production by attracting other game along predictable tracks. His account gives two examples of semi-permanent constructions designed, not to control water directly, but to control food sources at the watery site. He described a particularly ingenious semi-permanent trap for birds involved wicker-work snares, hides and snaring rods, and also noted that ‘elevated seats or platforms’ were constructed ‘for the purpose of watching and spearing the emu and kangaroo as they pass toward the water to drink’.9

One hundred years after Angas, anthropologist T.D. Campbell and his various associates examined about 34 relic Boandik campsites in the Woakwine Range and concluded that indigenous life had thrived in the area. Middens revealed a varied diet but one where fish, meat and shellfish were staples. In summer, they lived in coastal locations, which seemed to Campbell to have been ‘temporary camping places’, used when gathering and consuming sea foods’, while the floods and winds of the winter drove them into the higher ground in the Woakwine Range. Water management therefore consisted of two migration cycles controlled by the local group: migration to coastal food resources and to comfortably drier land at appropriate times.

Even out of the water, Woakwine Range winters are cold and windy. Angas remarked that the Aboriginal people built ‘wirlies’ out of ‘elods’, which would have made serviceable medium-term shelters familiar to historians over much of the world, and which Angas compared favourably with shepherds’ huts which were ‘not nearly so snug as the huts of the natives’.

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7 Ibid: 155.
9 Ibid: 148 and 139.
Campbell noted the existence of extensive permanent settlements in sheltered positions on the eastern side of the Woakwine Range and campsites that were so littered with unfinished and finished stone implements that he called them ‘factory’ sites. This speaks of elaborate social organization.

During the winter months, the extensive flats surrounding the narrow Woakwine Range were water-covered, sometimes with fast-flowing floodwaters, severely limiting hunting and gathering opportunities. Some campsites described by Campbell were outside the Range, situated on sandy ridges in the adjacent flats. During winter, game could be chased along these strategic ridges and easily ambushed.  

The indigenous peoples of the Woakwine Range patrolled a limited territory between ocean and the eastward swamps behind the Range and, according to Angas and Campbell and others, they could find anything they might need in the territory, with the water adding richness to their life. They dug wells and built weirs, ambushing platforms and bird traps to control the fruits of the water environment and I contend that the cycle of migration round their territory, in itself, was a water control device. In their life world the floods were not metaphoric enemies as they were for early settlers but were friends that brought variation. Their life world did not crave the stability of a built environment The vision of the Boandik ‘retreating’ or being ‘driven’ to high ground in winter is imposed from outside. Perhaps they looked forward to the more dense settlement, the cozy ‘huts’, the freshwater fish and the red meat, perhaps even a relatively restful time of reduced activity. In fact, Campbell’s identification of permanent campsites (why not use the word settlements?) puts the Boandik in full control. Not forced by the water but exerting husbandry over the water and its opportunities. Large permanent settlements, augmented by smaller camps in seasonally attractive food- and tool-production areas, and construction of semi permanent food production devices, indicate social organization. On the flimsy evidence we cannot see how socio-political decisions were made but we can make some guesses. Knowledge was certainly valuable currency and perhaps even political power. Where was the territory of the next ‘other’? Which food animals were around and how could they be caught? How to find drinking water? (Angas’ companions couldn’t do it even in a swamp) How to distribute the community’s goods, to care for the vulnerable, to teach life-skills?

SLICE TWO: SCHEME DRAIN L

People are often surprised to hear the South East has no natural rivers. ‘But I’ve seen them’, they protest. What they have seen is evidence of the hundreds of artificial drainage channels that stride silently across the country, their self-confident straight lines standing as semi-permanent monuments to the political decisions and the can-do engineering approach that created them and as metaphors for the land-hungry water-interventionist culture that demanded them. One of the largest is ‘scheme’ Drain L. Continuing the work of Drain K to the east, Drain L crosses Avenue Flat and the Avenue Range, Reedy Creek Range and Biscuit Flat before cutting through the Woakwine Range and discharging to the sea near Robe. How was such a work envisaged? The answer is, not all at once.

Grey’s party described above were not travelling the South East for fun. South Australia, proclaimed as a province of the British Crown in 1836, was expected it to pay its way, financing the whole venture by selling the so-called ‘waste lands’. Political disputes and the everyday circumstances of planting a business-government partnership 12 thousand miles from home slowed the licensed take-up of rural lands and two governors (Hindmarsh and Gawler) and two surveyors-general (Light and Sturt) were sacrificed to investor dissatisfaction. The third governor, George Grey, turned his hungry eyes to the South East. What were these stories Adelaide was hearing? Chancers from the east were growing meat and wool in the uncharted South East but

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10 Ibid: 460.
11 CAMPBELL, and NOONE 1943: 372.
exporting it from wharves in the eastern colonies. Grey’s party discovered plenty of attractive land in the far South East, but to get there! That was another matter. For Grey (and several governors after him) the South East’s problems were transport and communication. A bridge here, a weir there, a widened outlet somewhere else and the roads would stay open. The mail would get through.

Unfortunately for the Woakwine Aborigines, their turning point came early. The early pastoralists, who arrived in the 1850s, tolerated water – they were not paying market land prices, they had enough land to move their stock around with the seasons, and many of them cut drains that diverted floodwaters onto neighbouring runs anyway. Real money would come from ‘closer settlement’, the Holy Grail of land jobbing governments. Surveyor-general George Woodroffe Goyder’s 1864 valuation, showed the land behind the southern Woakwine Range was some of the wettest and, therefore, most unproductive to the government. Between 1864 and 1883 South Australia’s first systematic drainage cut into these swamps. The Boandik landscape was destroyed. As soon as drainage and associated clearance activities began, the wetland fauna and vegetation was doomed along with any way of life dependent on it. Not only did drainage change the water patterns, but it also brought an increased number of permanent intruders onto the land with a vested interest in Aboriginal eradication. These people came from a culture that was used to forcing vulnerable people off common land in the name of agricultural development, an all but invisible (culturally and actually) crop of ‘natives’ was not going to stop them. Informants from elsewhere in the South East show that a spiral of escalating violence followed sheep. Aboriginal hunters added them to their list of potential food, graziers demonstrated their relative power in acts of punishment and retribution, and Aboriginal communities retaliated.

The scheme
Similar northwest drainage channels and locally based ‘petition’ drains continued to be dug throughout the twentieth century but in 1911 the mind-set changed. If the swamps occurred on the landward side of the fossilised dune systems, why go to the enormous nuisance of channelling them away? Why not just cut through the old dunes of the Woakwine Range and send the troublesome water straight out to sea? In 1890, Goyder estimated the whole thing might cost about £1 million but would reclaim over two million acres. A handful of Royal Commissions convinced the government, which legislated a scheme whereby landholders representing three-quarters of the value of the land to be drained could petition the government to build drains, which the landholders would then pay for over 42 years. Understandably, landholders were unenthusiastic about petition drains but especially wet years between 1906 and 1910 renewed their agitation. The next scheme proposed building major outlet channels, which petition drains could feed into, and required the landholders to carry only half the cost. Locals, by then organised into Drainage Committees, voted in 1909 (with a very narrow majority) to accept the scheme. Drain L-K (62 kilometres) and Drain M (34 kilometres) are the east-west arteries of the scheme.

Woakwine Conservation Reserve, a remnant of mallee vegetation with its associated wildlife, now crowns the Range and Drain L is visible as a cutting slicing through range and reserve, separating north from south. Apart from this narrow three to four kilometre strip, the Range is almost cleared of natural vegetation. Because of the reserve, Drain L’s cutting, known also as the Kangaroo Hill Cutting, remains part of the Woakwine Range’s accessible landscape and at one time a lookout was prepared but since abandoned. The relationship between being accessible and being public is discussed below. The reserve’s existence is a ghostly footprint of slice one – fragile, insecure and unpeopled.

As an historical site, the cutting reflects the scheme that created it and its very isolation reflects the failure of that scheme. Where is the increased population the scheme was designed to support? Not even construction attracted population. Earlier drains had been built in times of exceptionally high unemployment, which made labour cheap. Teams of men were induced to

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12 SAPP 1890/64.
camp in the wilderness and hack a way through peat or limestone, colouring the work camps with their resentment and associated violence and alcohol-related unpredictability. The economy of 1911, when work on Drain L began, was more buoyant and wages higher, which, combined with the sheer scale of the Kangaroo Hill Cutting, encouraged the engineer-in-chief to design the job around machinery. In addition, cutting Drain K-L used 109 tons of gelignite, 107 tons of gunpowder, 25,845 fuse coils and 146, 285 detonators between 1912 and 1922.\textsuperscript{13} Even so, the drain gathered its own transient labour community but the majority were local to the South East. For example, on 16 October 1914 there were 253 men employed across the entire scheme and 201 of them were South East residents and in the dry season of 1915, more than 450 men were scattered across the scheme\textsuperscript{14}, implying substantial underemployment in the region even during World War I.

If we see the water as a metaphor for plenty in the Boandik and Meintangk landscape, in the landscape of 1918, Drain L is a metaphor for order and civilization. It symbolises the vagaries of nature brought under human control, belief in a particular planned future, power in the immediate landscape. It also symbolises the power of the ‘civilization’ that supports it but, does it symbolise success? Drain L’s purpose was to increase the region’s population but not even the work camps did that. Beyond an initial immigration flow into the Millicent area (much of it from elsewhere in the South East) drainage has not changed the social landscape. The rural economy remained fixed on large landholders; transport and communication infrastructure remained dependent on central government; and the devastation of 1920 demonstrated that the region remained flood-prone. Unlike the earliest drains, which were dug by government teams brought from Adelaide, South Easterners destined to return to everyday life constructed the scheme drains. Drains were markers of South East identity against the non-watery parts of South Australia, even for those living in the settled towns.

![Photograph 1: Drain L in 1947 before being widened.](image)

As a water control strategy, does Drain L reflect the social organization that created it? As a fulcrum in a major scheme, Drain L could only have been produced by a central government with strong local interests. Local landholders were reasonably happy to divert floodwaters onto each other’s land and were certainly completely uninterested in closer settlement. Even local

\textsuperscript{13} MALCOLM TURNER and DEREK CARTER Down the Drains: The Story of Events and Personalities Associated with 125 Years of Drainage in the South-East of South Australia (1989) South-Eastern Drainage Board, Adelaide: 62.

\textsuperscript{14} ibid: 54.
councils found it hard to invest in potential residents. So, while Drain L does reflect pressures from local groups and their drainage demands, that reflection should not be overemphasised. Drain L is much more a reflection of the central government’s own motivational search for more profitable land sales. Sectional demands of the far South East, what might be called distal local demands, are also more significant than local demands. Settlers around the major towns, particularly Mount Gambier, were locked into an economic relationship with Adelaide. From the first, government drainage was about providing reliable transport and communication, and those concerns still motivated distal locals in their unwitting partnership with the central government. In June 1861 the Mount Gambier newspaper editor had written:

We conceive that the duty of the inhabitants of the South-East District and of Mount Gambier in particular is to agitate for public improvements, and to give the government no rest until it has done a measure of justice to this locality.\(^{15}\)

The editor here sets up a South East identity in opposition to the government, seeming not to realise the congruity of their aspirations. In addition to these more obvious forms of social organization, drainage schemes were supported by city-located demands that undesirables (including unemployed and returned soldiers) be cheaply employed on infrastructure projects.

\textbf{SLICE THREE: MURRAY McCOURT’S WOAKWINE CUTTING}

Since South East drainage began, private drains have been a prominent feature. In fact, some parts of the government drainage schemes were deemed necessary because uncoordinated private drain digging and flood-wall building added to the flood risk. The subject of time-slice three is the most famous of them all: the Woakwine Cutting. This drain, which cuts through the Woakwine Range between Drains L and M, was begun in May 1957 and began to flow in May 1963. Government legislation in 1947 had given the South Eastern Drainage Board (the body by then responsible for all aspects of drainage in the region) power to control private drains (even to render unlicensed drains ineffective). Murray McCourt, a grazier and horticulturist, sought Board approval of his work. He was at first refused but, after what he described to the Postcards television programme as ‘a few years of persuasive argument’, the South Eastern Drainage Board agreed that McCourt might drain his property into coastal Lake George. Two significant circumstances should be noted. First that the Board did not approve McCourt’s design and second, that the board did not give written permission for drainage into Lake George until a few weeks before the cutting’s completion. This dispute is subject to continuing research. Rosemary McCourt wrote:

The South Eastern Drainage Board drew up a plan of the proposed channel using the standard procedures of the time. This, however, was not adopted. Murray decided to take a ‘calculated risk’ and have almost perpendicular walls. It was realised that a drainage channel of this depth of 93-feet or over 28-metres had never been attempted in Australia and there could be unforeseen problems, slipping of the steep walls being the major concern. In this region, previous cuttings were constructed with gentle slopes to avoid this possibility. If the general practice had been followed, time and cost would have been nearly doubled.\(^{16}\)

As slice two showed, the South East drainage scheme depended on two trunk canals, which gathered all auxiliary drainage and carried ‘excess’ water from behind the Woakwine Range.

\(^{15}\) Border Watch 7 June 1861.

through to the sea. Drain M, skirting McCourt’s property, was the logical recipient of its drainage work, especially since, between 1950 and 1972, the South Australian government expanded its programme of diverting water to the coast rather than to the upper south east, widening Drains L, K, and M and expanding their feeder networks.

McCourt’s well-known cutting is a landscape of hyperbole. A regular tourist-stop on the road between Robe and Beachport, it has a fan-club of admirers attracted to the ‘marvel of engineering’ and the monument to ‘one man’s persistence’ in the teeth of both nature and the government bureaucracy. Rosemary McCourt’s little book with its cover picture of husband Murray perched above his monument is available in delis, supermarkets and information centres throughout the region. Before crossing the little picnic area and reaching the wired-in viewing platform that overlooks the cutting the viewer passes a display of some of the drain-digging machinery and a board telling that ‘the work was undertaken by 2 men, Mr McCourt and Mr [Dick] McIntyre … with the aid of a caterpillar D7 tractor a 7 ton Drain Ripper, Letoureau 8-11 yard scraper and explosives’. Nothing is said of the army of McCourt employees and the viewing area’s emphasis on machinery (like all the cutting’s narratives) obscures gelignite’s starring role. By the time the viewer sees the cutting, the cultural landscape has framed the story into one of triumph and success.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Some thoughts on the public/private dichotomy
A cultural landscape speaks loudest about its beholders not its creators and these visually dominating cuttings are particularly insistent. I recently visited tourist information centres and public libraries in the regional centres around the Woakwine Range expressing interest in the area’s drainage schemes. All official tourist guidance led to Murray McCourt’s Woakwine Cutting. A conversation in one regional Information Centre (Robe) demonstrated an interesting interpretation of private/public, which I suspect underlies much landscape invisibleness. Asking for drainage information at Robe, I was given a pamphlet about McCourt’s cutting. ‘This is a private drain’, I said, ‘I am interested in the government drain, Drain L’. Drain L actually drains into the sea through Robe, just down the road from where we were, whereas McCourt’s cutting is about 38 kilometres away towards Beachport. ‘Oh yes’, she agreed, Drain L probably did cut through the Range but you couldn’t go there. ‘It’s on private land’, she warned. As described in slice two, Drain L’s Woakwine cutting is in a statutorily proclaimed conservation reserve and is accessed by public roads which, although unmetalled and overgrown, I travelled in a conventional vehicle on the first fine day after more than a week of torrential winter rains. This is not private land. On the other hand, McCourt’s cutting is on private land and its viewing area is supported by Beachport’s branch of the Lions service club.
Photograph 2: Murray McCourt’s Woakwine Cutting. Peering down from the observation deck, the eye follows the water at the bottom of the cutting out across the flat to Lake George in the background.

How are these perfectly obvious features of the landscape misinterpreted? Partly, by experience. If we have been to a place it is by some internalised functional definition, a public place. If it was not public, how could we have been there? If we have not physically been to a place then it is private or, at least, not public by our functional definition. Another cause of the misinterpretation strongly related to experience is ease of access. Even though its lookout is not marked on standard maps, McCourt’s cutting is signposted from the main road in South Australia’s familiar white on brown like any other significant tourist site. Its access road is broad and well surfaced and the actual site is well defined and equipped with picnic tables and descriptive (celebratory) signs. It is landscaped for us, designed for public consumption. Drain
L’s cutting, on the other hand, is hidden (and hence made private) by difficulty of access. Unlike McCourt’s lookout, Drain L’s lookout is marked on Australian federal government maps but there its accessibility ends. No reference to the cutting or the lookout appears anywhere on the landscape and the conservation reserve is only announced at its perimeter after an uneasy journey, bumping over about five kilometres of unmarked and seldom used dirt roads. This drive is not for the fainthearted. As the narrowing track pushes its way over exposed rocks and through overhanging vegetation, this place feels private, even secret. Reaching the overgrown, rocky clearing at some time widened, graded and marked by huge, unnaturally positioned boulders as a parking area, where is the lookout? A few metres striking through the bush in the expected direction and there it is, a sudden vista. Drain L’s cut snakes through the Range with the observer perched dizzyingly above. The landscape is a good one. Framed by ground and sky and the proximal vanishing points where Drain L’s canyon disappears to right and left in the folds of the Range, its trees and sheep are artfully arranged to almost, but not quite, normalise this outrageous and dangerous canal.

Photograph 3: Drain L’s Woakwine Cutting, also known as Kangaroo Hill Cutting. The lack of a viewing platform and the length and width of Drain L means this canyon dominates the landscape but makes for a less dramatic photograph.
Some thoughts on cultural landscape and identity
Water control strategies are articulations of belonging in a particular landscape and understanding them helps historians to understand the ways in which a landscape has been socially and culturally (and politically) constructed. This paper, which looks at the three time-slices in a specific landscape, shows various forms of social organisation cut into the landscape. Slice one shows a culture that emanates from the landscape, controlling its environment by migration and imprinting itself on the landscape by its use of available seasonal food and shelter resources. It is now almost invisible. A few well-guarded living sites attest to a once-living landscape but, apart from indications of seasonal migration, the water control strategies (visible in the historical record) have disappeared from the land. Slice two shows an imported culture of interventionist water controllers. Their community combined its resources to re-write the landscape and, once done, the powerful inscriptions became truth. Recent attempts to re-evaluate the drainage schemes of the past are strongly rejected by their heroisers. Even some who accept the drains’ roles in today’s water and land management problems do not accept that rendering some drains less effective might re-reclaim the reclaimed land. The third slice shows what might be called a neo-local culture in which individuals who identify strongly with their perception of their own
needs recreate the landscape against the community’s wishes, that is, against government policy. Contemporary perceptions blur slices two and three until ‘drainage’ itself is the identifier and the whole scheme of reclaiming the South East conflates into one local event. The landscape at slice three is an easier to interpret representation of local identity than to comprehend the myriad competing interests and ideas that produced successive waves of government drain engineering. Furthermore, in its focus on hard work and two named men, slice three offers identity to any passing dreamer. Although the cut at slice three is deeper than the Kangaroo Hill cutting, the landscape is smaller. The frame includes so much that is familiar or at least comprehensible – tractors in a shed, signs on a wall, laid-out parking and picnic tables. Most limiting of all, the cutting itself, although overhung by the viewing platform is outside the wire. Official tourist shots show a commanding vista down the drain and across the flats to Lake George but visitors do not see that view. On site, as the photograph above shows, the landscape is tamed – framed and shrunk by the protective wire. The view might enthrall but can never dominate. Unlike on Kangaroo Hill, the viewer is always safe.

Some thoughts on invisibility
Tor Arnenson (1998) makes the point that ‘losing landscapes means losing memory banks’, which means that losing the landscape ‘threaten[s] social cohesion in the affected group’. He goes on to make the point that, even more than losing the landscape, groups are affected by the ways in which their landscapes are lost. By examining these three time-slices against each other (illuminated by the fourth) this paper can say something about the invisible when reading the social organisation in the cultural landscapes of the study area. The paper demonstrates that historical explanation is not derivable from the landscape. Slice one is almost completely derived from the historical record. Slivers of its environment remain in reserves and inaccessible areas and some cultural activity can be imagined from the terrain but, in the main, the landscape is silent. On a recent field trip, I found local knowledge of the indigenous past invariably scant or absent. The ‘Boandik Information Centre’ at Beachport, had closed some months earlier and all that remained were several artefacts, and worse, artefacts that had been collected from outside the area mixed with locally gathered material. The Beachport council information officer in her role as a National Trust officer is part of a team attempting to interpret the material.

Likewise, slices two and three are monuments to immense power that is completely invisible and its agency is only graspable when combined with other ways of knowing. At McCourt’s cutting the cultural artefacts add explanation and the small scale means the viewer feels in control of the explanation. Drain, tractor, old swamp and outlet can all be seen as one landscape. The viewer feels in control of the hows and whys – even though an historian would disagree – and can identify with the whole story. On the other hand, the visible remnants of slice one and the occasional glimpses of silent canals at slice two show only hints of huge systems, systems that most viewers do not look for and are therefore not likely to see. While this paper refrains from conjecture about Boandik or Meintangk identity, it contends that Arnenson’s warning is generally illustrated in these slices through the Woakwine Range. For example, community imagination ignores 140 years of largely failed attempts to make land available to small settlers (rural labourers, soldier settlers, etc) when it celebrates one drain built by a huge landowner whose family first settled the area in the 1880s.

Some thoughts on ‘doing’ history and ‘understanding’ cultural landscapes
On examining any landscape we are instantly reminded that any place (or perhaps all places) has been crossed and re-crossed by all sorts of cultural influences. Permanent cultural changes in a landscape are monuments to certain forms of power, even though the landscape does not necessarily divulge the source or even direction of its power and cannot assert that things unseen or invisible are not powerful. They are also monuments to certain attitudes to land. The water control strategies examined are investments in a particular place. Certainly, they are investments
of recognizable resources such as money, time or effort, but they are also investments of self and vision. They imprint on the landscape statements of purpose, markers of social organisation and indications of identity. They give power to their implementers by demonstrating a sense of agency in the present combined with a demonstration that the future can be controlled, all producing a sense of identity that can be read in the landscape.

The slices also communicate their visions of each other’s landscapes. For example, slice two sees slice one as a snake-infested, disease-ridden wilderness, slice three sees slice two as an unnecessarily bureaucracy-bound limitation to its ambitions, while what might be called slice four (today) looks at slice three as a monument to individual endeavour. Thus demonstrating that the cultural landscape shows its viewer what its viewer wants to see. At the same time, the cultural landscape is a site of analysis where a range of histories can be present at the same time – not so much present in layers of meaning, which implies a sort of geological ranking or stratification – but juxtaposed in a non-hierarchical, non-patterned co-existence and cultural inter-play of different traditions and experiences. Historical meaning must come from what observers bring with them.

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