Setting Out

If I try to describe what I understand a cultural landscape to be, the first thing that comes to mind is an experience that affected me deeply enough that it stands definitively in my memory. I was taking part in a re-enactment of the first historically recorded landing of Europeans on Australian soil, a kind of theatrical (and Eurocentric) story-telling of first contact. While we were sailing along the expedition’s contact zone on the eastern Gulf of Carpenteria we had a series of encounters with Indigenous communities. When we arrived at the southern limit of the original Dutch voyage, Silas Wolmby, elder of the Wic Ngathan people who had called the same landscape home for thousands of years, led me around his country and told me some stories. The culture from which the stories emerged was foreign to me, the place was a long way from my home, and I was no longer on the sea where my authority as a navigator counted for something. Perhaps as a result of this dislocation I had an epiphany. As he walked his country and told his stories, the landscape for Silas did not function simply as a mnemonic, nor even as that most realistic of theatrical backdrops—real scenery—to lend atmosphere to his narrative. I began to understand that, not only did the poetics of the landscape speak their way into the story as he told it, but that simultaneously the reverse was happening. And the sound of a voice falling among baler shells and brigalow being so evanescent, this was something that needed repeating over and over by each successive generation. Landscape needs constant attention.

This is what I posted on my internet journal at the time.

Captain’s Journal

Aurukun, Cape York Peninsula

18 August 2000

‘Old Stories, New Stories’

…When we arrive at the shore there is a crowd from the community, traditional owners and elders waiting for us. In a ritual that is becoming familiar to us we are met by an elder, Silas Wolmby, who comes down the beach carrying spears. I ask him for permission for us whitefellas to walk on his ground.

‘Yes, you are welcome to come ashore. You can come here anytime.’ He plants a spear tip-first into the sand, signifying that there will be no hostility. We, the Duyfken mob, clamber out of the tinnies and stand on the sand in our bare feet.

A group of men and women come forward daubed with white body paint and wearing feather head-dresses. A rhythm starts on the clap-sticks and everyone is clapping in time. A chant begins. Spears whirl, arms wave, knees and elbows shake, sand flies out from stamping feet. The dance ends with a whoop. The sequence is repeated over and over, the words of the songs changing and the dance moves altering with each repetition. We are mesmerised. We have no idea what the performances mean, but none of us is unmoved.

Silas and his brother Ray have heard we are sailing to Cape Keerweer and they are keen to come with us. They have been handed down stories about their ancestors meeting some Dutch sailors who came there looking for water a long time ago. They want to show us their land, the well, and where the meeting happened. I tell them they will be welcome on board Duyfken. They have their blankets ready in no time. These blokes know how to travel light.

Back on board Duyfken we wait for the sea breeze to die down before getting under way. Silas sits cross legged on the deck and talks. Slowly a small crowd of us gathers round to listen to him. His words emerge from his wiry white whiskers in a long circuitous stream, meandering from place to place and from time to time. At first he is hard to follow as he talks of events past and present without distinguishing the time-frame. It’s unsettling if you are used to stories having a beginning, a middle and an end. After a while I relax into a listening style that is less anxious about chronology. After all, his words are like a long continuous poem that has been going on so long that to talk of beginnings and ends is meaningless.

Silas fixes me with his deep-set eyes. ‘These stories have been passed down to me, from my father, from my grandfather, from my great grandfather … I must pass them down to my children. And I will tell them of the Dutch, coming here and meeting with us. And I will tell them about you people on the Duyfken,'
coming here and meeting with us. These are old stories, but they are new stories too.’

Perhaps this is why the people on the communities up here seem to like the idea of our re-enactment so much. They understand better than we do what we are up to. We are re-telling an old story, keeping it alive by living it, but at the same time making it a story of our own, of our own time.

Silas explains the meaning of the dance we saw this morning. It is a dance for the spirits of the dead. Though they are long since buried, their spirits are still here. They come looking this way, then that way, as the Big Man sings. The people call out for the ghosts to stay. They are missing their dead ones, their ancestors. But the Big Man says: ‘No. Stay away. Finished. Enough.’ The ghosts go away again.

The spirits have been evoked by the song, brought to mind by the living. A space is created for grieving and paying respect. But the spirits must remain where they belong, so they are banished from the living again. And the process is repeated, over and over.

Silas tells us that the dance is for the spirits of all the dead, black and white. The dance today commemorates both his ancestors and the Dutchmen who met in 1606 at Cape Keerweer.

Silas and his ancestors have been telling the story of Janszoon and the Duyfken these hundreds of years while most of the rest of the world remained ignorant. Silas, sitting on the deck of Duyfken, his milky eyes moving between us and the sky, tells the story to us as though it were common knowledge. Now we are part of his story too.

And he is part of ours at last. Two branches of the same story intersect. And the spirits look this way, then that way, while the Big Man speaks.

Peter Manthorpe
Listener

Captain’s Journal
Cape Keerweer
19 August 2000

‘First Mob, Second Mob, Us Mob’

We anchor just before dawn, well offshore. We are nearly two miles out from the
Cape yet the water is shallow and uneven. There are more than just navigational hazzards in this area. Silas and Ray tell us that one of the reasons they wanted to come with us when they heard we planned to visit Cape Keerweer was that they wanted to protect us from spirits who might get angry with us for disturbing them. This country is highly charged. It has a lot of stories attached to it and not all of them are happy.

We shuttle people ashore in the rubber boat and then spread out across the open expanse of sand, revelling in the space and silence. I walk beside Silas as he leads me on a hunt for a well. As we walk along the narrow strip of beach between the Kirke River and the sea he tells me many stories over and over. His voice is hypnotic, easy to listen to, but his words are complex and difficult. It is hard work to follow the many tracks of his stories as they meander back and forth between generations and from place to place. His stories fascinate me, but I’m exhausted trying to keep up with him.

‘The first mob, they came and anchored their ship way over there somewhere. (Silas waves his hand to indicate somewhere off to the north-west.) They came ashore in a smaller boat with three fellas on this side, three fellas on the other side, all with long paddles. The blackfellas, they were all watching from the trees over there. The Dutchies didn’t know the language so they made signs with their hands: ‘Water, water.’

‘They must have had that fight back that way. (He gestures back towards the trees on the other side of the river.) That girl, she really wanted that Dutchie. He must have been a young fella. That girl was a nice, beautiful girl. She had hair down to here (right down her back) and she had breasts and she was really beautiful. The Dutch fella turned around all of a sudden and there’s this beautiful girl. The first time he turned he didn’t see anything. Then he looked and saw her. She looked … That was enough.

‘That silly old fella my grandfather (ancestor), he hit him in the back of the neck. Maybe he is angry. Maybe he wants her for his wife, I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t want the Dutchie taking the women-folk.

‘That silly old fella he speared one fella. Then there were gunshots from the Dutchies: ‘Boom boom boom boom’. Then he tells the blackfellas: ‘You go and kill them all.’ They have to obey him. After the gunshots he says: ‘You have to go and burn that boat.’ The blackfellas killed nine of those Dutchies.’

‘How many blackfellas were killed?’ I ask.

‘Oh, eighty or ninety blackfellas killed. Something like that.’

After a long pause, Silas continues. ‘The *Duyfken* has come here twice now. This is an old story, but it’s a new story as well. We will remember you fellas
coming here. We will remember for ever.’

Back aboard the ship we heave up the anchor, set sail and head back to the north. Silas and Ray get a bucket of water and ask us to gather around. They moisten their hands with their own sweat by passing them under their armpits and then they rub their fingers over our heads, legs and feet. They blow over our heads, and rinse sea water through our hair. One after the other they perform this ceremony on each crew member who went ashore to Cape Keerweer. They double-check that they have not missed anybody.

‘The spirits can smell us on you now. They know you are our friends. They won’t harm you now. We don’t want any of your mob to get sick.’

As we sail slowly northward in the dying sea-breeze we sit around on deck eating our dinner and watching the sun go down. After a day of talking Silas and Ray are silent. The crew are quiet as well. It is a powerful thing to contemplate, that we are now incorporated into the same story as Janszoon and his crew, not only from the whitefella’s view of history, but from the blackfella’s perspective also. Cape Keerweer for us was a meeting place. Our feelings could not be more different from those of ‘the first mob’, for whom it was a battleground.

Peter Manthorpe
Master

Captain’s Journal
Gulf of Carpenteria
20 August 2000

‘Ghosting’

We say farewell to our friends Ray and Silas Wolmby this morning. Rick from the volunteer rescue comes out from Weipa in a big cat and picks them up. As we say our goodbyes Silas grasps my hand firmly in both of his. He looks me straight in the eye, unashamed that his eyes are moist. He says: ‘Peter, we will remember you fellas. Duyfken has come here twice now. We will remember you fellas coming here for ever.’

My eyes aren’t too dry either. I feel the cigarette packet in his shirt pocket crush against my chest as we embrace. He whispers in my ear: ‘Thank you for
coming here. You are my son now.’

‘I’m proud,’ I reply. Silas reminds me of my Dad too. Eyes that can see detail in the distance, a low but arresting voice. A kind of bearing: gentle but commanding. And those endless stories …

Peter Manthorpe
Master

**Intermezzo**

Silas told me other stories at Cape Keerweer that day. All at the same time. One minute he would be talking about the arrival of the Dutch, then he would skip to part of a story about another group who came later, then he would be talking about something that happened to him during World War Two, then he would race back in time to the moment when his people came into existence. He also told me about concerns in his current life which I realised later also had points of contact with the other stories. At the time I found him exhausting, trying to follow not only the twists and turns of individual plots but also trying to work out which story they belonged to. He seemed to step lightly from history to memory to legend to community politics and back again without missing a beat. It was like listening to many different musical instruments played simultaneously and trying to discern the tune each was playing. Reading my notes from that day, incomplete as they are, I am convinced that, whereas I heard a cacophony, someone as expert at listening to Silas as he is in telling stories would have heard a symphony. And someone who had grown up on his land and moved through it from childhood with someone like Silas as a guide, which is to say someone who was completely at home at Keerweer, would have those listening skills, have their ear attuned to Silas’s contrapuntal style, and probably find it easier than I did to keep pace with his long septuagenarian stride across the soft terrain.

It was tempting to think that if I spent enough time with Silas and visited Keerweer enough I would get to know him, his stories and his country well enough that I could feel at home, but Silas and I are both old enough to know that isn’t going to happen. Besides, unless you sail there, it costs more to get from Adelaide to Keerweer than it does to get to Europe.

After making these discouraging calculations I wondered if this kind of knowledge, of a home landscape together with a poetic understanding of it
transmitted through oral repetition by an expert elder, represented a lacuna in my
cultural heritage. So I explored some possibilities, and recorded this.

From Memory Cove
2005

‘Pete? You awake there, Petey-Boy?’
Opening my eyes I see Dad framed by the hatchway and silhouetted by the
morning light. Judging by the even grey glow in the cumulus cyclorama behind
his head it is well after dawn, well after the time I promised myself I would wake.
Just once in my life I would like to get out of my bunk before him.

As my eyes focus I notice that the sky is oscillating behind Dad’s head.
Overnight a swell has built up to the south and some of the surge is finding its
way into the cove, rocking the boat.

‘This little joggle,’ says Dad, in answer to a question he can evidently read in
my pillow-scars, ‘came in at about four o’clock. If you still want to cross over to
Thistle Island we’d better get under way because I don’t like the look of this lot
out to the west. It could get nasty by tonight and we don’t want to get caught.
There’s coffee in the pot and I’ve made some toast.’

He’s playing his part — alert, experienced, feeling the signs — and I’m
playing mine, dragging on my clothes, late for breakfast on my own expedition. I
check the barometer as I pass. It’s on its way down, but there’s no point me
tapping it. There are no rewards for being second to the glass. I munch my toast
hunched in the cockpit while Dad fusses around the boat, putting things in lockers
and lashing loose gear with lanyards.

Small waves break rhythmically onto the steep white beach just ahead of the
boat: a series of ‘clomps’, crisp and hard, as if no liquid were involved. I can feel
the firm, compacted sand in the sound of each wave’s impact.

Above the sand the scrub begins along an even front, following the curve of
the cove so that the beach is a uniform strip of white between two rocky points.
The small and straggly trees form a remarkably dense coverage over the hills and
cliff-tops all about. I imagine the eight seamen looking for water. They would
have dug wells on the beach above the high-tide mark, and they would have
scouted through the scrub for signs of springs and creeks. This morning the strong
smell of wet ground and humus carries over the water with the chill of the wind.
A winter smell. But in February it would have been different: dusty eucalypt leaves and gently spiced native flowers baking in the sun mixed with the ocean’s scents blowing over the peninsula from the Bight. A thirsty cocktail.

‘Do you think they would have found any fresh water here?’

I don’t have to explain who ‘they’ are. By this stage of the saga, now Dad is eighty-one and I am forty-four, we can retell the story while leaving the main narrative unspoken, hanging in the air between us or perhaps resting in the landscape all around. Instead we discuss the details and speculate on the unknowable minutiae of what happened that February evening when eight of Matthew Flinders’s men and their cutter disappeared on their way back to the Investigator from Memory Cove.

‘No, there’s no water anywhere around here. They would have been heading back empty handed. When you’ve finished your coffee, go forward and shorten up the anchor line. I’ll start getting some sail on her.’

Dad and I built this boat ourselves. Trim is a catboat: a traditional small boat with one sail. We own her in partnership—two master mariners—so the question of command could easily be a thorny one. But youth is the decider in this instance: I can more easily remember what it feels like to take orders than the old man, whom I cannot think of in any rank lower than The Old Man. When I was a kid he called me bosun (a petty officer, appropriately enough), but that was when he called Mum his first mate (he chuckling, she rolling her eyes). Mum doesn’t go sailing much any more and I think I might have got a promotion since then. I like to think of myself as second in command. I can’t be rising above my station: there are only two of us on board.

‘Aye aye.’ I rinse my mug in the fish-well and go forward to heave up the anchor.

‘If you steer between Little and Lewis Islands you’ll be heading straight for Investigator’s anchorage.’ We’ve got the chart spread out on the engine box and Dad points to his small pencilled cross near Observatory Point on Thistle Island. The two pencil lines correspond to the two bearings Flinders records in his Voyage to Terra Australis for Saturday, 20 February 1802. Trim is reaching briskly eastward and I find that I have to steer well to the north of the course to allow for the effects of the ebb-tide racing southward.

‘Do you think it’s possible the cutter could have been pushed by the current onto the rocks on Little Island? Or Lewis?’

‘Well, it’s a possibility’, says Dad. ‘The rocks are steep-to and slippery, and it would be hard to pull yourself out to safety. And the cutter was found stove in, so she must have hit something at some stage, though that could have happened after
she was swamped. But I don’t think they would have made a mistake like that, misjudging the current so badly. You see, John Thistle would have been at the helm, I have no doubt: a consummate seaman who’d made hundreds of small boat journeys like this one. And if he called the coast of England home he must have known a strong current when he saw one. No, I reckon they got into one of these tide races where the sea stands up in nearly vertical walls. They probably took a wave over the gunwale, a bloody good dollop, and before they could lighten her up by baling she would have taken another one. So then she’d be lying low in the water and one more little short one would have finished her off. Then they’d all be in the water with their heavy boots dragging them under and these steep little seas breaking over their heads every few seconds. Even a strong swimmer could easily drown like that.’

An image plays into my mind like a memory. It comes from hearing the same words spoken in the same voice when I was no more than a child. The image is just a pair of leather boots, the soles held on with iron nails, kicking and kicking in the dark swirling current, finding nothing to kick against but more and more water, darker and darker. The image fades, thankfully, before the kicking stops, like waking up from a dream just before the nightmare’s denouement.

There is only ever one pair of boots in this recurring image of mine, not eight pairs. It occurs to me that the feet in the boots in my mind are my own. The image is a manifestation of my empathy for the drowning men. How many times could that have happened to me? I wriggle my bare toes luxuriously in the cold air swirling around the cockpit, and scrunch them into the wet timber of the deck. I’ve never felt comfortable wearing footwear on a boat, no matter how cold it is.

Little Island is close aboard our port beam. Steep waves crack and cluck against the rocky shore in busy confusion, raising an industrial din. Or it could be the sound of drowning gods. The boat rocks more energetically in the backwash from the rocks. Dad raises his voice a little to talk above the noise.

‘See up ahead there? About a mile away? You can see the white water from here. That’s where the overfalls are the worst. It’s called Harrison Shoal on this chart, but Flinders didn’t sound it. The bottom rises suddenly from fifteen fathoms to five in a little patch and it’s right on the course from Memory Cove to Observatory Point. That’s where I reckon they copped it. And while Flinders

---

didn’t record a shoal there, on *his* chart that area is exactly where he writes “Dangerous tide ripples”, or something like that.iii

*Trim* sails briskly towards a patch of water where the texture of the surface is different from the rest, as if brushed the wrong way, or as if its hackles were up. ‘Should I steer around this lot?’

‘We should be alright,’ says Dad, in a tone more reassuring than the strict meaning of his sentence. ‘We might take one or two waves on board, but it won’t do us any harm.’ He reaches into the cockpit locker, takes out a storm-board and slides it into its grooves in the hatchway without any further comment.

I resolve to try to steer through the rippling overfalls without getting us wet. My grip on the tiller tightens at the idea of re-enacting a Catastrophe. I look over at Dad, but he is staring at the sea. He wears an expression that might be mistaken for grim forbearance but which I recognise from spending long hours and days with him over many years to arise out of a deep satisfaction, a kind of rapture in the ability simply to float, and in the fluidity of the passing of time. We are heading into a whirlpool but he offers me no guidance. Part of me, a very old part of me that is still a child, is disappointed, not yet fully aware of the nature of his gift.

A more pragmatic part of me wonders what the University Ethics Committee would think of me drowning my father and myself in the name of post-graduate research.

Across a wide front ahead of *Trim* the water churns in a busy standing wave where the head of an eddy is rolling over its own tail. I push the tiller down and steer obliquely into the first trough. The bow dips. Mast and sail flick to leeward and return smartly upright, bringing the main-sheet tight with a twang. As the bow rises it scoops up some of the wave which then rolls along the deck from stem to stern. A couple of bucketfuls slop over the coaming onto our feet, only to slurp and gurgle out of the self-draining cockpit. This happens three times in quick succession. *Trim* is fully decked and the water drains straight back into the sea. Neither of us speak because we each know what is filling the mind of the other. It is a vivid picture involving a boat without a deck.

The anchor is down, the sail is stowed and Dad has me kneeling on the cockpit floor trying to net two agile whiting from the well because his knees are playing up. I cut four fillets, rinse them in the well and hand them down the hatch where

---

the smell of hot olive oil is already emerging. I hold the filleting board over the side and slide the remains of the fish into the sea: just heads, tails, backbones and viscera. The skeletons swim slowly downwards until they are two small flashes of white, and then they are gone.

In a few minutes my lunch is served: two slices of buttered bread, two fillets of fish and a glass of Riesling.

‘Get tore into that’, says Dad.

Over lunch we have time to contemplate the view from Observatory Point. We have anchored as near as we can to where the *Investigator* anchored in 1802 and the landscape has changed little since then. There are a few buildings on Thistle Island, but the other islands in Thorny Passage as well as the mainland as far as we can see are untouched by development. To the south-west of us lies the flat conical shape of Hopkins, then Smith just to the right with part of Williams peering out behind it, south of Cape Catastrophe. Looking back along the track we have just sailed the small white fleck of Memory Cove’s beach shows clearly on the mainland between Lewis and Little Islands. The latter is indeed very little, scarcely more than a rock above the water, named with a wry humour typical of Flinders even amid tragedy. To our north-west is Grindal Island. Beyond and partly obscured lies Taylor; Flinders no doubt thought it fitting that the second largest island in the group should be named after the midshipman, the young gentleman next in rank below Thistle, the master. So nineteenth century British class hierarchy is indelibly inscribed on the Australian landscape.

‘Does it ever strike you as strange,’ I ask, ‘that there were exactly the right number of islands to go around?’

‘That’s a remarkable coincidence, isn’t it?’

‘But there were other coincidences. What about the fortune teller?’

‘Ah. You’re talking about that fellow Pine, back in Spithead. Well, he predicted to Thistle that he would be lost before the expedition was joined by another vessel.’ Sure enough, he was lost. I don’t put any supernatural meaning onto that. I don’t believe you can tell the future any more than Flinders did.’

‘But he gave it enough importance that he published it in his journal. For such a level-headed scientist who didn’t even run a Sunday service on his ships it seems incredible that he even mentions Pine.’

---


It might be the emboldening effects of the wine, but I feel I must explore further.

‘And there’s that passage in Flinders’s journal about the snake. On the morning of the disaster Flinders and Thistle were walking over the island and they caught a black and yellow snake, a tiger snake I suppose…’

‘No, it was a python.’

‘… a python, right. And Flinders held it down with the butt of a musket while Thistle sewed up its mouth with a sail needle. Talk about symbolic.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, here they are on this voyage of discovery, a quest for knowledge, in a place they describe as though it had all been put there just for them, a kind of Garden of Eden, and what are they doing? They are sewing up the mouth of the serpent.’

‘I’ve never seen it like that before.’

‘Within about twelve hours of stitching up the snake Thistle would be dead. And you could easily see this as the moment when Flinders’s career peaks. When he turned north into Thorny Passage he was entering Spencer Gulf and he read the currents as evidence of the inland sea, or perhaps even the channel to the Gulf of Carpenteria. He got quite excited that the great discovery that would make him famous and influential was within reach, just up ahead. But instead of that he lost eight of his crew, the Gulf turned into a disappointment, then a few more miles down the coast he bumped into the French expedition coming the other way, effectively ending the possibility of any further discoveries. His next expedition, the circumnavigation, achieved only a fraction of what he intended, then he got shipwrecked, imprisoned, lost his health and finally died. It was all downhill from here. It was the beginning of the fall, you could say.’

‘All because of a snake!’ Dad laughs: a proper belly laugh. ‘The pitfalls of trying to outwit evil, eh? Pythons are not even venomous!’ He stops chuckling, suddenly serious. ‘Although they can give you a nasty bite.’

The plates are packed up and the empty wine bottle is stowed away. Dad keeps glancing at the cumulonimbus out to the west which is now a looming implacable menace just beyond the peninsula. I know that soon we will be on our way towards home. Or, rather, towards the shelter of Port Lincoln. I feel well at home here, anchored at Observatory Point as I have been many times before, sitting

---

vi Thanks to Rick Hosking for pointing out the timing of the snake-stitching episode.
with my father in a boat we built ourselves, surveying a landscape I am intimately familiar with since childhood. I’m not yet ready to leave.

‘Do you feel any spiritual connection to this landscape?’

Dad thinks for a while. ‘Well, I’m not much of a believer in the metaphysical. But I must admit, I can never sail through Thorny Passage without a sort of tingling feeling. I find myself wondering, what kind of man was Grindle? What was Hopkins like? Who was Williams? How did Smith see the world? I pay homage to them every time I pass through. They were all terrific seamen, as Flinders says in his journal. Especially Thistle.\textsuperscript{vii} A few years ago we held a commemorative service to the dead men on the bicentenary of the event. We lit a candle for each man and floated it off the beach in its own little wreath. The night was nearly calm and these eight little lights drifted out into Memory Cove, flickering in the dusk. Everyone was very moved. And it was hard not to feel the presence of the men in some way. So in a sense I suppose their spirits live on here.’ He pauses. ‘It’s probably just auto-suggestion, but it means you’ve got a soul, doesn’t it?’

‘But does the story of Flinders’s boat-crew give you any special attachment to this landscape?’

‘Oh, hell. I love all of this coast around here. The Gulfs, the Bight, the Island and especially Coffin Bay. I wouldn’t live anywhere else. I’ve explored a lot of the globe and I’ve never found a place I’d rather call home. But we’d better get under way, mate, because that lot out to the west is getting closer all the time. And you know how much I hate getting my feet wet.’

We are laughing, the pair of us delighted once again by Dad’s tired old joke that accumulates more meaning for me with every year that passes, as I go forward to heave up the anchor.

**Sheeting Home**

Trim is a real boat and the conversation with Dad is based on a real conversation—over the telephone. The journey we took was fictional, written from memory, because the weather on the weekend I planned to go was terrible. The Gulf Adventure did not take place. Yet I feel comfortable with evoking from memory landscapes (cultural, physical and familial) that are so familiar.

While there are obvious parallels between the Keerweer and Thorny Passage

\textsuperscript{vii} Flinders, *A Voyage*, Vol 1, p 139.
episodes, the most telling difference is that, while Silas’s stories seem to go back indefinitely in time, my father’s stories go back to Flinders’s arrival and stop.

If I try to read the landscape around Thorny Passage as a palimpsest and look for traces earlier than Flinders I draw a blank. In Flinders’s journal, as he sails this coast, taking great pains to record in miniature on his charts every turn of the shore, every rock and island, every detail of the physical landscape, he makes no effort to discover the cultural landscape. Like other explorers of his time he assumes that the geographical features are all he need trouble with. When he has contact with Indigenous Australians he records information about them as though they can be understood by describing a collection of characteristics and habits, much like the fauna. Far from countenancing any deep cultural connection between the people and their landscape, the consistent undertone of the journals of Flinders and others is that those who dwell in these inhospitable places do so for want of a better home. In failing to understand the people, Flinders misses a fundamental aspect of the land he is striving to discover. Does this mean that parts of Australia still await discovery?

From the perspective of his cultural descendants, including my father and me, Flinders seems to have effectively made a complete erasure from the palimpsest of the Thorny Passage landscape, to the extent that his stories take on the semblance of creation myth. Flinders certainly saw his voyage as a kind of beginning for the country—why else would he have named Port Lincoln as a port, when his was the only ship that had ever called there? 

My father and I are complicit with Flinders. When we retell stories of the great navigator and leave his creative heroism intact we maintain his erasure. When we commemorate his dead crew, paying homage and lighting candles for them as if they were saints or gods, we forget that the islands named after them were certainly part of previous stories.

The best we can say about Flinders’s boat crew is that they were probably good at their jobs, but we have elevated them considerably above any of their peers. I wonder what those eight men would have thought if Pine the fortune-teller

\[viii\]

Flinders, *A voyage*, Vol 1, p 148. Although realistic about its drawbacks, Flinders clearly envisioned Port Lincoln as useful to a future colony: ‘Port Lincoln is certainly a fine harbour; and it is much to be regretted that it possesses no constant run of fresh water, unless it should be in Spalding Cove, which we did not examine. Our pits at the head of the port will however, supply ships at all times; and though discoloured by whitish clay, the water has no pernicious quality, nor is it ill tasted. This and wood, which was easily produced, were all that we found of use to ships; and for the establishment of a colony, which the excellence of the port might seem to invite, the little fertility of the soil offers no inducement.’
had predicted that, of all the jack-tars of King George’s navy, they would be remembered by future generations with wreaths and candles, and have their names inscribed in memorials the size of entire cemeteries, some taller even than Nelson’s column. They might have been distracted from the irritations of pox and loose teeth just long enough to declare the sayer a lunatic before returning to their tankards.

Missing from Silas’s stories was anything I could identify as romanticism; nor did he seem to sanctify or deify any of the characters in the stories he told me. (‘That silly old fella, my grandfather …’) Perhaps this disparity can be accounted for by the different imperatives of the storytellers. Silas had no anxieties about calling Keerweer home. But I suspect that my father and I, as descendants of Europeans, latecomers to the landscape who have ‘explored a lot of the globe and never found a place [we’d] rather call home’, have more reason to burden with any extra weight available to us those elements of our culture that anchor us to the landscape. Whereas a corpse in the sea will be eaten by lice and sharks, spirits and gods are immortal.