‘a projecting part of the main’: an Elliston palimpsest

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Abstract
This paper considers a number of ways of reading a particular cultural land/sea-scape at Elliston, on South Australia’s west coast. At first glance it may surprise some to hear a clifftop with a clearly defined track described as cultural, because cultural landscapes are usually regarded as places that live in the imaginations of a community, as repositories of shared notions about cultural value. They are usually both sites and sights. Cultural landscapes are usually domesticated in some way, reconstructed by human intervention over considerable periods of time as a consequence of complex human landuse and lived practices, and often representing an agrarian or pastoral ideal that summons up ideas of a golden age. Such landscapes usually reveal evidence of human intervention shaped not only by cultural practice but also by aesthetic judgment, and are often designed to maintain a way of life by conserving specific features of that landscape.

How can a cliff in a littoral zone, a ‘projecting part of the main’, reveal evidence of human intervention, where any evidence of occupation is hard to find?

These particular cliffs are typical of one kind of ‘cultural landscape’ because they can read as a palimpsest, as layered with meanings as the limestone cliffs themselves, but in this case the meanings are carried in stories told about events that happened on the cliffs, in a series of unsettling and unreconciled narratives. What is it that suggests the palimpsest at this site, aside from the layers of limestone on granite that are only obvious from the sea, or from a joyflight around the cliffs? This is a place of the imagination, where one can look out to the west from the anxious coast and contemplate where some think Jonathan Swift imagined Houyhnhnm’s Land and Lilliput might be. The Elliston cliffs are a dramatic tourist destination, an eidetic place to visit and photograph. This place also looks down a world-famous surfing break, considered by some of the more yahoo locals to be theirs. It is a place with a single memorial, marking the location and the time when a young man, a visitor to Elliston, was taken by a white pointer shark. It is a historical place, a site of community dispute and discord, remembered in stories told of a massacre, recording still-vivid memories of hundreds of Aboriginal people driven to their deaths by a vigilante band of vengeful settlers. It is a place where in 1970 Aboriginal people were denied the right to erect a memorial to frontier deaths, because no historian had established that a massacre had occurred. It is a place where now every two years there is staged a community project, where in a spirit of collaboration and reconciliation artists come together to present their work against an extraordinary backdrop.

The Elliston cliffs can be seen as another kind of cultural landscape, a place where storytelling, narrative and history jostle with ideas of the scenic and the picturesque. This paper will consider these storied layers, and will note the difficulty of reconciling the many confrontational readings the place has engendered. This paper attempts an on-going engagement with this place, with how representations of historical events (should) challenge the ways in which the
past is recalled. How do such representations inform the community’s sense of cultural memory? Whose memories constitute this archive? And who are the custodians of the archive? Who has the right to speak?

This paper also considers two more difficult questions. First, can an exhibition of sculptures and other kinds of art installations do any sort of justice to these storied layers? And second, how should we read contemporary versions by writers of Indigenous background that discuss the contentious history associated with the Elliston cliffs, especially in the light of the debates raised by the History Wars?