Chapter 2

Interacting with the desert in the western Simpson

Introduction

The first chapter introduced the interactions that shaped my thinking, and rethinking, in this thesis. This chapter continues the introduction to the work, in terms of its regional context; the physical characteristics of the region as a desert, and the over-arching historical contexts of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line and establishment of pastoral land use. These have played an active role in shaping the forms of interactions that have taken place in the region. The grain of the land, the climatic exigencies and prior histories are the circumstances in which local histories were lived out. The characteristics of the western Simpson landscape as a desert are understood as no mere colourful background ‘out there’, but are integral to the interactions that take place. Its dynamics enable some practices and choices and resist others. They provide context, but in the process are incorporated into the lives lived through them. The physical characteristics and historical context are in turn shaped by the interactions in which they are implicated. For example, as will be discussed further in chapter 4, attitudes to water are derived from both historical/cultural expectations and from experience of the local conditions; alterations to
waterplaces to make them more compliant with expectation lead to reconfigurations of the density and forms of interaction there by people, plants, cattle. These in turn alter the local ecosystem and the ongoing historical role of the waterplace.

In this chapter I will show how ideas of historical entanglement can be usefully applied to any landscape. The particular characteristics of those landscapes are contributing parts of the particular forms of historical entanglement that are set in train. In Chapter 1 I discussed five threads that contribute to the entangled skein of a place. The physical characteristics and historical context are not additional to those, rather they are implicated in all of them. I have separated them with reluctance, for clarity.

The descriptions of the physical desert that follow are based in one way of knowing the desert; one that is available to outsiders, involving comparison with non-desert, non-local attributes of land and climate. I draw on literature that defines what a ‘desert’ is, and set out the distinctive features of the Simpson Desert’s climate and location, in order to orient people who do not know the region. I then describe an over-arching historical scenario that takes in the distinctive historical characteristics of the region. Again, this is a framework derived from outsider perspectives, and again I provide it to give a context in which to ground understandings of the specific histories of interaction that follow in later chapters.

These are not the ways that people who live there – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – would necessarily choose to describe the qualities of the country they know. Finer grained, local descriptions of how people lived through and with the qualities described here are the substance of the following three chapters.

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**Extremes not averages**

The country now known as the western Simpson Desert is big country, silica rock and sand country. Here stony desert meets the red sand of the Simpson’s vast 300km wide dune field (fig 2.1, 2.2). At the same time, it is pastoral
country, a national park, and a tourist stop-over. Ancestral stories tell of it as Perentie country, Two Snakes, Grub, Kestrel, and Kingfisher Dreaming country. It is the most easterly of Australia’s wide core of continental deserts, and in the records it is the most arid part of the world’s driest continent.¹ Rainfall statistics in the western Simpson exemplify aridity, with a low annual median of 100-150mm of rain, and high rates of evaporation of 30 times that amount.² Unlike the rainfall to the north of the Simpson, which is highly seasonal, there is no clear wet or dry season. So rainfall is erratic, variable, unpredictable and unreliable, whereas evaporation rates are relentlessly high.

Temperatures also vary hugely, from the high 40°s to -6°C on frosty mid-year nights. On any one day, there is a marked diurnal variation in temperature. There are long droughts and extensive floods. The country is best understood in terms of extremes rather than averages. All who live there must find ways of dealing with, or avoiding, these extremes.

One of the principal qualities of the desert is thus its variability and unpredictability, which has both spatial and temporal dimensions: at different times the same place can present very different prospects. While big rains are rare,³ they structure the characteristics of the environment, recharging the aquifers and sub-surface flows, including the permanent mikiri wells in the

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¹ Arid conditions prevail when the amount of rain falling is less than 20% of the potential moisture loss through evaporation under normal climatic conditions, according to the United Nations Environment Program definition (Veth et al 2005: 2-3).
² For comparison, the median annual rainfall for Canberra ACT is 604mm, and for Alice Springs is 258mm (http://www.bom.gov.au accessed 3/12/09).
³ Mt Dare has been a weather station since January 1950, and its records show big rains and flooding in 1955 and 1967, 1979, 1984, 1992 and 1997-8, with record floods in 1974-6 (Bureau of Meteorology www.bom.gov.au/climate/averages). Madigan, writing in 1946 (1946: 159-160) examined the rainfall records from Charlotte Waters, which kept records from 1874, moved to Finke in 1938. He summarizes: Exceptionally good, wet years were 1877, 1889, 1909 and 1910. Good years that follow exceptionally dry seasons were in 1877, 1885, 1889 and 1904. The worst, driest years were 1876, 1900, 1929 and 1940. ‘There have been eight good seasons in 62 years … and eight bad seasons.’
Fig 2.1: Simpson dune with cover of Yellowtop (*Othonna gregorii*), 1995

Fig 2.2: Gibber plain south of Mt Dare, looking NW across Abminga Creek towards stony uplands of the Stanley Tableland, 1996
dune field, so allowing a greater standing biomass of perennial plants than might otherwise be predicted.\textsuperscript{4} That is, the Simpson has a surprising coverage of trees and bushes. After a big rain, most water quickly evaporates or runs into the sand, although on its way through it ‘wakes up’ the country’s seed store of grasses, herbs and wildflowers. For example, after rains in 1997 the usually bare gibber covered slopes of the residual hills west of Paradise Bore were transformed to green, and pelicans swam on the corridors between sand dunes near Woodgates Swamp (fig 2.3). These claypans, swampy areas such as Duck Ponds and Woodgate Swamp, and chains of waterholes in river channels, then hold water for months (fig 2.4).

These rapid transformations are part of a ‘pulse and reserve’ pattern. This describes the dominance of water events in controlling biological processes in arid ecosystems, more than other factors, such as inter-species competition and predation.\textsuperscript{5} A rain event activates the reserves of seeds or root stores and triggers a pulse of active vegetation growth, some of which is lost to death and consumption, but part is put back in reserve for the next rain. The magnitude of the pulse depends on the extent of the trigger event, and other variables such as soil type, nitrogen, and micro-relief.

Distributions and densities of vertebrate animals show a follow-on spatial and temporal variability, as their presence, survival and breeding is also dependent on water and vegetation. They have behavioural and physiological adaptations to this variability. They may move long distances to escape drought and to follow water, they may have the ability to aestivate, to shelter in moist refuges or deep underground, or to postpone reproduction until there is plentiful food, or adopt a non-restrictive, wide-based diet.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{4} Stafford Smith and Morton 1990: 261.
\textsuperscript{5} Whitford 2002: 12-21.
\textsuperscript{6} Eldridge and Reid 1998: 3-4; Robin 2008.
Fig 2.3: Green desert after rain, east of Mt Dare, June 1998

Fig 2.4: Ewillina waterhole full, inspected by Bingey Lowe and Harry Taylor, October, 1997
Writing of the US Sonoran desert, naturalist and philosopher Joseph Wood Krutch reminds us that

neither the plants nor the animals live under what is, for them, painfully difficult conditions. ... Only to those who come from somewhere else is there anything abnormal about the conditions which prevail.\(^7\)

Desert conditions may be extreme, but the scale of that is accentuated if it is framed in terms of a comparison with other conditions, familiar from elsewhere, that do not share these variabilities. For those who are acclimatised, they have a less daunting valency.

**Diversity, variability and unpredictability**

The word desert commonly conjures up a picture of one vast homogeneous field of sand-dunes. However, as well as spatial and temporal fluctuations in rainfall and temperature, ‘one of the surprising characteristics of deserts is their environmental diversity’.\(^8\) The Simpson presents a mosaic of sediments, vegetation and animal distributions, variations in drainage, and forms of permanent water.\(^9\) Attention to the dimensions and implications of this diversity is a current focus of desert ecological research and ‘detail is the new big picture’.\(^10\)

An influential characteristic of the western Simpson area, responsible for a suite of these important ‘details’, is the presence of the Finke River floodout. The Finke River channel, having worked its way south-east from its headwaters in the McDonnell Ranges and east along the northern edges of hard silcrete-capped residual tablelands, turns in a right-angle in its final reaches as it hits the mass of NNW-SSE oriented sand ridges, and runs out into the dunes. The *Arkaya* story of the Ancestral Kestrel hunting of the two Rainbow Serpents or ‘Stranger Snakes with the pretty markings’, gives the history of the formation of the Lower Finke River (see box).

When the river flows, any sediments suspended in the water are deposited in this floodout area, enhancing its nutrient levels as well as its moisture. It thus

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\(^7\) cited by James F Reynolds in Whitford 2002: preface.
\(^8\) Hiscock and Wallis 2005: 34.
\(^9\) Hiscock and Wallis 2005: 34.
\(^10\) Robin 2008: 121.
provides a biological refuge in dry times, with enhanced levels of water, nutrients and food, which supports a high diversity of vegetation and fauna especially relative to the surrounding land.\(^{11}\)

Finke River floods are typically slow-moving, shallow and wide. Most of the sand they were carrying has already been deposited upstream. This kind of flooding would not have a great effect on surface archaeological material.\(^{12}\) In contrast, shorter, local rivers carry large amounts of sand which is deposited over wide areas during floods.\(^ {13}\) Small local dune fields occur downwind from these sandy stream channel sources, east of Pedirka, at Woodgate swamp, and near Federal and Bloods Creek. In the Eringa bore area, north of Spring Creek, flat bodies of yellow sand, much more gypseous and calcareous, have their source in the water flowing out of the mound springs, and grow distinctive cottonbush and bluebush stands (fig 2.5).\(^ {14}\)

The major field of parallel sand ridges of the Simpson Desert is popularly claimed to be the world’s largest.\(^ {15}\) Its dunes are 10-35m tall and up to 200km long, running parallel in a NNW-SSE direction, forming part of a continent-wide swirl of longitudinal sand dunes. Standing on the top of one of these dunes, an analogy with the sea feels appropriate, given the scale of the orange vastness and the magnificent symmetry and rhythm of the rise and fall of the dunes. From top of a ‘wave’ you can look out across the ridges into the horizon, but in a swale you are contained in a linear corridor, cut off from the others. Canegrass (\textit{Zygochloa paradoxa}) stabilizes the dune crests, and spinifex (\textit{Triodia basedowii}) covers the dune flanks.

\(^{11}\) Eldridge and Reid 1998: 4, 8.
\(^{12}\) Geo-archaeologist Anne McConnell pers comm. 1996.
\(^{13}\) Davey et al 1985: 21.
Fig 2.5: Bluebush and cotton bush on calcareous sands, Spring Creek delta, north of Ambullina waterhole

Fig 2.6: Dune vegetation after rain, parakeelyas (*Calandrinia* spp)
**Arkaya**

Rardi tyurarda yalparladnai
Yanata pangkilyai ya
Rardi tyurarda yalparladnai
Ya mirlkente nalanalura

Rardi tyurarda yalparladnai
Yanata pangkilyai ya
Rikurata yalparladnai
Yamirlkente nalanura

Rardi tyurarda yalparladnai
Ymirlkente nalanalura
Rardi tyurarda yalparladnai
Ya milkente nalanalura

Nata pangkilya
ya radi tyurarda yalparladnai
yanata pangkilyai

Langattanta Rata turupere
Ya Rarta tumpere
Yepinyalananta la Rata turupere

Lararulpakara Riwewerlanai
Yantyalparantya
Warakararupakara Riwewerlanai

[They (the two Serpents) have come back down here in this tunnel!
Ah, the two of them have come back here, travelling back inside this tunnel!
Then he (the Kestrel) jumped right down (into the tunnel)
Ah, they (the Snakes) have gone back to Iwirla!]

These sung verses of the much more extensive Arkaya History are those for Abmakilya [waterhole near Charlotte Waters] and the [Finke] channel to Irwila [Ewillinna water hole], as recited to linguist Luise Hercus, partly in English and partly in Wangkangurru, with verses predominantly in Arrernte in 1967, 1968, 1972 by Wankanguru elder Mick McLean Irinyili. Mirlkinta means looking (Hercus and Potezny 1993: 8-10). Luise Hercus’ introduces this History (1993:2 -3):
The Kestrel, Kirrki, hunts down and kills the two Kanmarri, (Rainbow Serpents or ‘Stranger Snakes with the pretty markings’, sometimes
also Carpet Snakes). The Serpents make tunnels and the Kestrel digs in after them, giving rise to the course of Coglin Creek (which runs by Charlotte Waters to meet the Finke) and the lower Finke River. Where the channel disappears in stony or swampy country, that is where the Kestrel lost the Serpents. The channel reappears where he found them again. This process ceases at Ewillinna waterhole where the Finke channel breaks down into a series of flood-outs and small channels. The Arkaya is thus the History of the formation of the Lower Finke River. The song story was cherished by Wangkangurru and lower Southern Arrernte people. It was part of an advanced form of initiation involving acquisition of specialised knowledge, and sung only by those with this knowledge, but could be heard by everybody.

‘Arkaya, the Kestrel History’ translated by Luise Hercus, Site Information by Vlad Potezny, National Estates Grant Program, 1993, Australian Heritage Commission

These plants provide habitat for a great diversity of lizards, ‘very successful in this nutritionally poor and rare-event driven environment’,¹⁶ and small mammals such as the Ooldea Dunnart (*Sminthopsis ooldea*) Sandy Inland Mouse (*Pseudomys hermannsburgensis*), Spinifex Hopping-Mouse (*Notomys alexis*) and the Desert Mouse (*Pseudomys desertor*).¹⁷ Acacias (especially *Acacia ligulata*, also *Acacia aneura, Acacia ramulosa*) and Hakeas grow in the dune swales, and a great variety of grasses and flowering herbs and daisies, including yellowtop (*Othonna gregorii*) and purple parakeelyas (*Calandrinia* spp), appear after rain (fig 2.1, 2.6).

Stony tablelands, flat-topped hills and breakaways form a boundary with the dune field. These form from a capping layer of resistant silcrete rock which erodes, developing steep-sided buttes and mesas. These formations stand out, yellow and pink, clear-cut against the sky. They are drained by short channels

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⁷Eldridge and Reid 1998: 24-5. Many of the type specimens for these desert rodents and marsupials were collected by Baldwin Spencer and PM Byrne at Charlotte Waters: *Dasyuroides byrnei* is named after him (Kemper 1990).
which run across gently sloping plains, surfaced with characteristic pavements of evenly compacted red-brown polished stone gibber (fig 2.7). Reading the newspaper in the Ranger’s camp at Dalhousie Springs in September 1997, the first images of the surface of the planet Mars were published on the front page. They looked uncannily like the gibber plains we had been exploring that stretch away south of the Dalhousie homestead ruins.

The minor watercourses encourage the growth of sparse *Eremophila* and *Cassia* (fig 2.8). They converge to form larger coarse gravelled creek-lines, where same-age stands of young Minnarichie or Red Mulga (*Acacia cyperephylla*) saplings grow. These trees only grow in restricted patches on the western and eastern sides of the Simpson Desert. They have needle-leaves and distinctive red bark that curls like delicate wood shavings (fig 2.9, 2.10).

You can see a long way in this silica-dominated country, heat haze permitting. The horizon simmers and glints white in the heat of the day, but flushes pink and softens in the cooler mornings and evenings. The sky is large and its clouds are particularly noticeable as they pass. In rain storms, you can see rain falling from individual clouds in long streaks in the distance (fig 2.11).

Another consequential and distinctive feature of the western side of the Simpson is the presence of Australia’s largest group of more than 60 active artesian mound springs, now called Dalhousie Springs. These springs form the only permanent surface water for 150km in any direction. They are so isolated they contain small endemic fish species – a goby, several hardyheads, a catfish, a gudgeon and a perch – the latter grows as big as 20cm in length. The individual springs are of different sizes, with varying temperatures from cool to

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18 Wankanguru elder Mick McLean Irinjili who taught linguist Luise Hercus (see below), had another name, Palku-Bula-Thanckaiwarnda which means ‘two banks of cloud sitting down together’ (Rothwell 2008). Another elder Ben Murray Palku-ngyuu’s name translates as ‘one mass of clouds’ (Hercus 1987: 150). This reflects the importance of paying attention to the skiescape and forms and behaviour of clouds in the ‘thought-world’ of a Simpson dunefield dwelling people.


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Fig 2.7: Gibber pavement near Abminga Creek

Fig 2.8: Water courses across gibber slopes of Mt Crispe picked out by *Eremophila* and *Cassia* bushes plus four acacias
Fig 2.9: Minnarichie, or Red Mulga tree in bed of Stevensons Creek, with Gidgee mulga and coolibahs behind

Fig 2.10: Detail of Minnarichie bark
Fig 2.11: Rain storm northeast of Mt Dare, July 1996

Fig 2.12: Aerial photograph of Dalhousie Springs, Peter Caust c1995
hot, each with a Lower Southern Arrernte name and associated stories which recognise fine distinctions between them. They provide rare permanent watering points in this most arid region of Australia for birds, dingoes, people, and, between 1872 and 1986, for cattle (fig 2.12, 2.13).

In August 2007, beside the main Irrwanyere spring, a baby mound spring was forming. Less than two years old, it was only 10cm in size (fig 2.14). The processes that have formed the extensive Dalhousie Springs over 1-2 millennia are still active. Mound springs form as ancient groundwater that has travelled underground from eastern Australia escapes under pressure to the land surface from the deep artesian basin through fractures in the overlying rocks. Sand, clay and dissolved chemicals are deposited around the spring vents, building up mounds, until the water cannot rise any higher. The high rims of inactive mounds are more prominent than those still seeping or bubbling. They have the same raw newness as an active volcanic landscape. In recognition of all these rare qualities, the Witjera-Dalhousie mound springs were included on the National Heritage List in 2009.21

Clusters of reeds and melaleucas grow at the active spring vents, marking them with patches of green against the white and khaki mineral salt surface. Walking on this surface is like walking on the moon; every footstep leaves an indelible impression. Any rain turns it into a bottomless mud hole. Spring Creek, a largely dry, braided channel, carries the main spring runoff out to the west, towards the Finke floodout and the dunefields.

The convergence of these major landscape elements of the western Simpson area – the Finke River floodout, the major complex of mound springs, and the conjunction of these water sources with the boundary between stony desert and the vast sandy desert dune field – especially in contrast to the relative homogeneity of the adjacent sand desert and stony desert – give it a relatively

Fig 2.13: Irrwanyere Spring, showing fringing reeds and *Melaleuca* (with two Spoonbills), 1997

Fig 2.14: Baby mound spring, near main Irrwanyere spring, August 2007
high biological diversity. They also distinguish it from other deserts, and from other parts of the Simpson Desert.

Unlike the more westerly deserts, the Simpson lies within the Lake Eyre drainage basin. Along the northern edge of the Simpson, a series of more or less parallel river channels – the Todd, the Hale, the Plenty, and the Hay Rivers – run into the dunefield from the northwest. They do not reach Lake Eyre. In the eastern Simpson, the channels of the Georgina and Diamantina Rivers and Coopers Creek, on the eastern side of a major watershed, drain not Northern Territory but central and western Queensland into an extensive system of playa lakes, including Lake Eyre in the south. This low-lying part of Australia dominates the eastern half of the Australian arid zone, producing its distinctive aridity.

These physical characteristics of the desert are defining attributes, actively involved in all lives lived there; plant, animal, human. In turn, the land is affected by these lives.

The landscape we see today is one that has been altered to an unknown, but major, extent by the changes introduced through colonial land use since the mid 1870s. Most of these impacts were unforeseen or unintended. They were profound and enduring. The areas which were beneficial to native fauna and flora as refuges were also targeted by introduced animals – cattle, horse, goats, donkeys, camels and rabbits, and new predators; cats and foxes. Allan Breadon’s reminiscences of the 1870s record this process, though he attributes it to rabbits alone, not the stock themselves:

the Finke was considered good or fairly good for 18 months or two years with stock on the Finke country in those days and for years after would carry five times more stock than it can now [1933]. Rabbits of course is the trouble. They have ruined the country lock stock and barrel … they undermined the ground and killed young timber to say nothing about grass. They entered into direct competition for water sources and feed, especially in times of environmental stress, with subsequent extinctions of mammals and

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22 Eldridge and Reid 1998: 4, 38, 42.
23 Kotwicki 1986: 42.
25 Breadon, Allan ‘Reminiscences’ ML mss 953 p 42.
birds. Balwin Spencer records that there were no rabbits in Central Australia when he first crossed it in 1893 and 1897. But in 1901 they were spreading rapidly, and in 1923 they were present in thousands. ‘To judge by the results of collecting, they had almost completely exterminated not only the smaller marsupials, such as the rabbit-bandicoot but also the jerboa rats. In 1896 and 1901 the latter were abundant, even a nuisance to the collector because the natives caught them so easily’. Hoofed animals and vehicles churned up water holes and caused compaction of top soil, and gully erosion where tracks cut into the gibber pavement. A large group of Minnarichie trees in Red Mulga Creek stand dead as a result of the saline bore upstream being left to run. On the other hand, for zebra finches, birds dependent on standing water, the introduction of bores allowed these once wholly nomadic species to remain in one area. Similarly, Purnie Bore, drilled in 1963 by French oil explorers, has created a permanent artificial wetland many kilometres into the dune field, and now supports a wide range of wildlife, including an isolated population of water birds.

People’s interactions with the characteristics of the land have been active in shaping the country and the histories of people’s lives in the area, from their pre-colonial configurations into the late twentieth century. The land is an active element in those histories, shaping and being shaped by them.

**The ‘ugly desert’: marginality as a characteristic**

The western Simpson Desert area sits at the edge of the few wider regional histories that have been written. Accounts of South Australia and the Northern Territory (which was part of South Australia from 1863 to 1911), either focus on the Top End, and have limited reference to places and events south of Alice Springs, or are concentrated on the ‘settled districts’ south of Clare (see fig 2.15,
Fig 2.15: Map of Goyder's line and settled areas of South Australia in 1870 (from Hirst 1973: 4)
Fig 2.16: Map of Overland Telegraph Line repeater stations

Fig 2.17: Telegram dispatch box from the Alice Springs repeater station museum, Northern Territory, showing the sequence of repeater stations, 1997
2.16) with few references to what was officially known as ‘the Far North’, beyond Goyder’s Line.\(^30\)

While the western Simpson area shares such elements as the Overland Telegraph Line and rangeland cattle production with the areas north and south of it, it has distinctive features and dynamics that cannot be understood by simply stretching these histories over it. The marginal position of the region, at least from the perspective of centres of population elsewhere, is an important one of these features and dynamics, added to the physical characteristics described above.

Many of the existing accounts of the area come from travellers and expeditioners who came to it from elsewhere and did not stay long. They convey their resultant sense of remoteness and alienation, as they return to the settled south with reports of excessive magnitude, monotony and emptiness. For example, Baldwin Spencer described his travel northwards from Oodnadatta during the 1894 Horn Scientific research expedition:

> We travelled, until evening set in, over dreary parched-up flats and between low lying flat topped hills … not a speck of water nor a sign of anything green - nothing but white and cream and pink and lilac coloured sand and stretches of hard quartzite stones … away from all sign of human habitation.\(^31\)

Doris Blackwell described her journey north from Adelaide in 1899, when she was eight years old, in similar terms. She was accompanying her father, who was the Telegraph Officer at Alice Springs from 1899-1908. The tone of her memory is lonely, with a child’s eye for the detail of the repetitive pattern of sand in the wheels, and an adult writer’s attention for the symbolism of the telegraph line:

> We bounced over gibbers and other protrusions; the harness creaked and flapped and the buggies rattled … we had the smell of sweating horses constantly in our nostrils … Surrounding us now for as far as one could see there was absolutely nothing that was man-made. The flat floor of an ugly desert stretched out on all sides until it disappeared where the earth met a cloudless sky … On and on, walking and trotting, the wooden spokes casting moving images, the


\(^{31}\) Spencer 1928: 22.
sand adhering to the iron tyres until halfway up the wheel, there to curl over and be taken down by gravity in a spiral of flying drift that never failed to fascinate me. In all that vast land there was not one fence, or any track other than the one we used. But we knew that civilisation was ahead of us, for we followed the slender iron poles supporting the two wires of the Overland Telegraph line.32

But the route was not empty except in the travellers’ comparative perceptions, and the way only interminable because it was taking these writers far from their familiar homes. For those who lived there, the desert was not defined by extremity or marginality, but was home. The forms that ‘home’ could take there is one of the themes that develops in the following chapters.

There are two senses of the word ‘desert’ in the English language; one is this technical, quantitative measure of aridity, the other is concerned with potential habitability and emptiness – a desert island, for example, is one empty of people and ‘civilisation’. In common usage there is a bleeding of this second meaning into the first, which has led to a recurring generic sense of deserts being unoccupied; the home of no-one.

It is significant that there are no English language or Judeo-Christian derived metaphors for desert as ‘home’. For those inculcated with Judeo-Christian traditions, deserts have always had a potent dual resonance, as both fearful, unblessed, howling wastelands, but also as places capable of providing spiritual elation, as for prophets. They are simultaneously wicked and godless, and pure and innocent, offering simplicity and with that, intensity.33 But neither sense accommodates a feeling of domesticity or rootedness in the desert.

Recent in-comers to the region have defined it in these marginal terms, lacking in economic usefulness from a European economic perspective, which they have read as linked self-evidently to a lack of people. For example, the 1880s explorer Charles Winneke wrote of the northeast of the Simpson that ‘This country is perfect desert, and I am afraid will never be of much use to the squatter. I am almost certain that this country has never been visited by natives’.34 South Australian ‘heroic exploration geologist’35 Cecil Madigan

34 Winneke 1884: 4.
expressed the same view 50 years later: ‘the high temperatures, low rainfall, absence of water and of fodder, the sand itself, and the mechanical difficulties presented by the sand ridges, make the sand ridge country absolutely useless. It is as profitable to discuss the value of the Grand Erg … of the Sahara as to consider the settlement of these Australian deserts.’ He considered the sand ridge country to be ‘quite useless and entirely unoccupied’. He may have been writing to counter the boosterish tendencies of nineteenth century explorers’ reports, discussed below. But in the process, he emptied the desert of people and wrote the long-term Aboriginal occupants and their histories out of consideration.

Madigan organised the first aerial survey of this ‘great ribbed desert’ in 1929. He had previous experience in the deserts of Antarctica and Sudan, and was able to draw on the support of Defence Department aircraft and crew, flying ‘4,000 miles over country mainly unknown and uninhabited’. Their Flight 6 took in the area that is now in Witjera National Park. From this most remote aerial view, the ultimate outsider’s perspective, he concluded

we have satisfied ourselves that nothing lay within the borders of the Unknown area other than what is to be seen round its margins; that there are no ranges or lakes, nothing but a continuation of the everlasting sand ridges, with variation only in the nature of the clay flats between them, being more subject to inundation in the northern parts and near watercourse, where pastoral possibilities are greater. ... we saw nothing to warrant further investigation by prospectors, in fact I would recommend that no more human effort be expended on the region, and that the somewhat melancholy satisfaction be left to us of having at least saved the danger and expense of further exploration.

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35 Parkin 1986.
37 Madigan 1938: 6. Later, however, in his crossing of the northern Simpson dune field in 1937, Madigan was surprised to ‘discover … signs of the former presence of aboriginals, the only such indications seen in the whole desert crossing’ in the form of chalcedony artefacts, with an outcrop nearby, east of the Hale River, west of the Hay River. He conceded that ‘This disproved my theory and Winneke’s that aboriginals never entered any part of the desert. It was the natives of the east, west and south who had denied all knowledge of the desert, but it was now obviously no more than the southern parts that could be quite unknown to any aboriginal’ (Madigan 1946: 64-5).
38 Madigan 1929: 14.
40 Madigan 1929.
41 Madigan 1929: 7, 19-22.
42 Madigan 1929: 25.
He named it at this time the ‘Simpson’ Desert in deference to the then President of the Geographical Society, a key cultural institution of Adelaide, Allen A Simpson.\textsuperscript{43} In doing so, he over-rove the descriptor ‘Arunta desert’, which acknowledged Indigenous occupation and priority. This name was used by Griffith Taylor in 1926, perhaps reflecting wider usage, and anthropologists TGH Strehlow and NDB Tindale continued to use it in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{44} Madigan’s and Winnecke’s way of knowing the desert is one that sits most easily with those who know it from the outside looking in. Madigan’s choice of name honoured a set of references and hierarchy based beyond the desert, where land is alienable and water flows across the surface. From that perspective deserts are hostile and waterless, a challenge to be overcome; an explorer’s perspective, that is examined further below.

\textit{Archaeological linguistic and anthropological perceptions}

The construction of the desert as marginal is not sustained when it is placed in a longer term perspective. Archaeological, linguistic and anthropological researches are based on knowledge traditions and perspectives imported into the desert, too, but their various orientations can provide ways towards a translation that puts the desert centrally, not as a comparison with elsewhere, and accepts the life within it as a given.

\textbf{Anthropological research}

Linguist and anthropologist TGH Strehlow was born at Hermansburg and much of his research was focused in western Arrernte country. But he did travel through the western Simpson area with Wankanguru men, Tom Bagot \textit{Injola} and Mick McLean \textit{Irenjeli} (who later worked extensively with Luise Hercus), recording place names. He passed through Charlotte Waters several times on his journeys visiting pastoral stations and Moorilperinna (Pmar’ Ulbura) at the bend in the Finke River in 1955, and Goyders Creek in 1965.\textsuperscript{45} In 1969 he located

\textsuperscript{43} Simpson was a longstanding manufacturer of metal goods in Adelaide and socially active leader and benefactor there (A. Simpson and Son Ltd 1954: 44-45). He provided financial support for this and Madigan’s follow-up 1937 expedition across the sand desert from Andado Station to Birdsville with a dozen camels (Madigan 1946).

\textsuperscript{44} Strehlow 1947: map ‘Simpson or Arunta Desert’; Tindale 1940 Map showing the distribution of the Aboriginal tribes of Australia, http://nla.gov.au/nla.map-gmod91; Griffith Taylor 1926: map.

\textsuperscript{45} Summary information provided in a letter from David Hugo, Research Director, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, 5 February 1998, written to me in response to a research query
sites that were ‘necessary for the definition of the old boundaries between the Lower Southern Arrernte and their neighbours such as the Arabana, and the Ankekerinja’, and sites in the Lower Southern Arrernte area, which he describes as stretching from southern Northern Territory to near Oodnadatta.\textsuperscript{46} He gives an account of the language markers for a break in the Arrernte dialect at about the area of Old Crown Point on the Finke Rover. The southern dialect is distinct from that of the western and northern Arrernte. He also documents a discontinuity in social relationships between the southern and the western and northern Arrernte at Old Crown Point.\textsuperscript{47}

Anthropologist AP Elkin also worked with Lower Southern Arrernte people. He camped at Macumba in 1930 with people who ‘remembered Spencer and Gillen’s journeys through their country.’\textsuperscript{48} He describes the social organisation of the Arrernte subgroups, including the Lower Southern Arrernte, providing detailed accounts of the specificities of their kinship and totemic affiliations.\textsuperscript{49}

**The work of Luise Hercus**

An exceptional body of documentation and translation of stories of places in the Simpson Desert and Lake Eyre region has been built up through the work of Wankanguru, Lower Southern Arrernte, Dieri, and Arabunna people with Luise Hercus over the last 47 years. Luise is a pre-eminent linguist of Aboriginal Australian languages. In South Australia she worked with a surveyor, Vlad Potezny, enabling accurate records of the locations of places and the routes of the stories through the country. The records that resulted from these collaborations are a storehouse of interconnected language, human history and precise, place-based knowledge of the country and stories of the Ancestors that acted in it to make it and maintain it.

**Archaeological research**

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\textsuperscript{46} Strehlow 1969 Unpublished Report to AIAS on field trip to Central Australia. Doc 64/103 69/881. AIATSIS library, Canberra.

\textsuperscript{47} Strehlow 1947: 69-72, 81.

\textsuperscript{48} Elkin 1939/40: 439.

\textsuperscript{49} Elkin 1939/40a, b, 1934/5.
The Australian deserts were widely, if patchily, occupied by 40-30,000 years ago.\(^{50}\) The evidence for people’s occupation of the western Simpson region is much more recent. Radiocarbon dates on charcoal from hearths indicates that people were at least intermittently present there for at least 3000 years. The dated hearths are at Oolgawa swamp, on the eastern edge of the dunefield, at Marapadi, the western-most of the mikiri wells in the dunefield, and an open site on the Rodinga Range in the northern edge of the Simpson.\(^{51}\)

Archaeological research in the Australian arid zone has built up a picture of the adaptations people made to desert living in the increasingly arid conditions of the late Pleistocene-early Holocene. These were the establishment of long distance socio-economic networks and trade routes, the development of seed grinding technology which allowed intensive processing of seeds, and low densities of people. These are considered to be ‘risk reduction responses’.\(^{52}\) Based on evidence of increased rates and intensity of deposition of stone artefacts in excavated sequences, archaeologists propose that these social networks that make desert life more possible have been established for at least 1000, and possibly 5000 years.\(^{53}\) These they attribute to altered patterns of regional human interaction, perhaps associated with the establishment of patterns of land tenure and associated beliefs and ceremonial life that are recognisable in contemporary Aboriginal practices.

It is a struggle to obtain dated sequences in rock shelter-free areas such as the western Simpson. While the old and erosive surfaces of the stony desert provide favourable visibility for locating archaeological material, they hold lag deposits that are difficult to date.\(^{54}\) In contrast, for historical archaeological materials, marginal pastoral areas such as the western Simpson retain more extensive evidence for early forms of European landuse than the more successful areas, where continued usages obliterate earlier archaeological traces.\(^{55}\)

\(^{50}\) Smith et al 2005.  
^{51} Smith and Clark 1993.  
^{53} Smith 2005; Veth, Smith and Hiscock 2005.  
^{54} But see Fanning et al 2009.  
^{55} Connah 1993: 85.
There is widespread surface archaeological evidence for people’s use of the different types of environment in the region. Archaeological ground surveys show that the silica rock that covers the stony desert surfaces of the landscape has been used opportunistically to make stone flakes, perhaps to sharpen a wooden artefact or cut some fibre, then abandoned. Isolated stone artefacts are found at a low density on gibber pavements, dune fields, ridge lines and beside ephemeral creek beds.

Compared to this background widespread use of stone, larger, denser concentrations of stone artefacts accumulate in locations of more intense human occupation. Reliable water sources near the mound springs and on the terraces beside larger creeks and the Finke River are an obvious place where repeated visits by more people make for accumulations of more types of artefact, including grindstones, ground-edged axes, ochre, hammerstones, and delicately shaped formal artefacts – tula adzes and pirri points. These sites contain a greater diversity of stone raw materials, plus bone or emu egg shell in rare cases. They may be associated with features such as a hearth or a wurley or a stone arrangement. These denser scatters have a wide variety of stone raw materials used in them, including more fine grained materials - chalcedony, chert and silcrete as well as quartzite.

There are also numerous stone procurement and reduction sites in the landscape, in locations that are separate from the sites of built up occupational debris. Ceremonial stone arrangements are an important feature of this region.\footnote{McCarthy 1940.}

\section*{The historical framework for unheralded interactions}

The physical characteristics of the Simpson Desert were one of the active, shaping elements in the interactions that have taken place there. The other element required in the framework for understanding those interactions is their broad historical character and context.
The western Simpson is the site of early – relative to the western Australian deserts\textsuperscript{57} – and intense interaction between the Indigenous people of the centre and white in-comers\textsuperscript{58} from the occupied south, due to the surveys and construction of the Overland Telegraph Line, completed in 1872. Charlotte Waters was built there as the central of the line’s eleven repeater stations. These boosted and re-sent morse code messages along the 3000km of wire that was the core of the telegraph operations (map fig 2.17, and see chapter 3).

The line opened a bridgehead into central Australia, rapidly becoming the line for all transport and the stock route. The Dalhousie Springs station lease was to the east of the line, centred around the surface water of the mound springs, an apparently prime selection taken up by a quick-acting surveyor who had overseen construction of the southern part of the line, EM Bagot (see chapter 4). Abminga and Finke were the closest rail stations on the Ghan railway line that ran through the region from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs after its completion in 1929.

A distinctive aspect of the area is that there was no mission or reserve established for the Indigenous people dispossessed as seizure of pastoral land increased. Indigenous people camped around the bores and waterholes on the stations, or near the homesteads, or the official government outposts of the Telegraph station or the railway stations, which operated as ration stations from the 1880s.\textsuperscript{59}

\textit{“Developing nature’s gifts”: state expansion}

Explorers ‘haunt’ the desert according to Roslynn Haynes, in her study of representations of central Australia; ‘we cannot see the desert without their

\textsuperscript{57} See Smith 2005. Explorers Warburton (1872), Ernest Giles (1872), Gosse (1873), Forrest (1874) left from the Overland Telegraph Line to ‘feel their way’ into the western desert areas. They were avoided by the local Aboriginal people, although they saw their fires everywhere (Smith 2005: 11).

\textsuperscript{58} The most appropriate term to refer to ‘in-comers’ to the area is controversial, and varies in differing circumstances. They were mainly ‘white’, although people of ‘Afghan’ and Chinese origin were also prominent. Most were of English, Scottish or Irish origin, although there were also German descendants. By the 1870s many of the people involved were born in Australia rather than overseas. I use specific descriptors where possible, or the generic term ‘white’ where that is all that we know about them. This term draws attention to their distinction in relation to the Indigenous people. I refer to Indigenous people in terms of their language group where possible, or call them ‘locals’ in contrast to ‘incomers’ for the early phases of their interactions.

\textsuperscript{59} Doohan 1992; Rowse 1998; Foster 2000.
influence’. She points out that their accounts were ‘the first and most influential literature to emerge from the desert’. Explorers created journals knowing they would be published and read by members of government and by investors as well as the public. They drew maps that would be used by others to reach the same areas. Their reports had a difficult double role, ideally describing favourable land for expansion and at the same time not underplaying their own sufferings in the capricious desert.

Explorers were involved in commercial ventures as way-makers for colonists. The land they described and mapped was freighted with future potential, taken to be empty ‘wasteland’, and alienable. The colonialism that shaped Australia was of the ‘terra nullius’ form, in archaeologist Chris Gosden’s classification based on his long-term global comparison of forms of colonialism. As distinct from earlier colonial forms, this most recent type of colonialism ‘ignored and despised all foreign modalities of sociability’. The acquisition of new land was a crucial element in its workings. Taking this land out of native hands into immigrant possession distinguished modern settler societies from all other types of colonialism.

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The governor of South Australia from 1855-62, Sir Richard MacDonnell, fostered exploration in order to expand his colony’s territories and foster closer settlement. Closer settlement was that belief, and government policy, that ideally all land should be used intensively, for agriculture not pastoralism. Agricultural smallholdings ‘supported a more populous, more civilised and more democratic society, with its wealth more equally distributed’. This was ardently held to be a realisable and necessary goal for the young South Australian colony. Improvement of the land was a moral requirement: in the colonial ethos, ‘planting a population on uncivilized soil was an act of

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60 Haynes 1998: xi.
64 Gosden 2004: 116.
66 Gammage 2001: 112.
cultivation, designed to create model societies’.\(^67\) It also improved and enriched the land.\(^68\) After the 1869 Waste Lands Amendment Act, buyers were required to cultivate and reside on the land, not be absentee land owners.\(^69\) Alfred Giles, early explorer and resident in Northern Territory (part of South Australia until 1911) for 50 years, expresses this vision of inevitable succession for the land, still held strongly when he wrote in 1926:

For the past 40 years, millions of these acres have been used for purely pastoral occupation, and that of cattle only, but this is only the customary procedure in opening up new areas. The pastoralist is always the advance guard, making the rough bush roads and finding the waters, and years afterwards is slowly but surely followed by the agriculturalist. And so it will and must be in regard to the Northern Territory ...\(^70\)

As an early inducement, the South Australian government had offered a £2000 reward for the first crossing of the continent from the south to the north coast. This was won by John McDouall Stuart. His explorations, or at least the uses to which his descriptions of grassy plains were put, were ‘primarily responsible for stimulating South Australian interest in the north’.\(^71\)

Stuart advocated the formation of a colony on the Adelaide River in the Northern Territory. He saw it as a viable port for trading with India, exporting beef and mutton, importing ponies.\(^72\) South Australians saw expansion of their colony as an inherent good, ‘a vast field for future speculation and settlement’.\(^73\) Arguing that the explorers’ work gave them rights to it, the Northern Territory was made a part of South Australia (rather than NSW) in 1863.\(^74\) The principal aim was to colonise the Victoria River District. A poorly informed, optimistic view prevailed, that the economic advantages of pastoralism there would offset the disadvantages for the colony in its taking on responsibility for the arid land that lay between the settled districts of the south and the VRD.\(^75\) This was a major misunderstanding of the characteristics and capacities of the land, and

\(^{67}\) Gosden 2004: 126.  
\(^{68}\) Griffiths 1996b: 14-15.  
\(^{69}\) Goyder 1875: 10; Gammage 2001: 112; Cathcart 2009: 150-1.  
\(^{70}\) A. Giles introducing his account of ‘exploring in the ‘seventies’ 1926[1995]: xi.  
\(^{72}\) Stuart 1865: xviii.  
\(^{73}\) Powell 1996: 70.  
settlement of the north by South Australian colonists was to follow a torrid history, so drawn out, fraught and costly that the Northern Territory was resumed as part of the Commonwealth in 1911.\textsuperscript{76}

Notwithstanding the non-ideal prospects for pastoralism, let alone agriculture, in northern South Australia, land development did follow on the tail of exploration. The editor of Stuart’s journals, W Hardman, noted that

Hergott Springs were only discovered and named by Stuart three years before, yet we now find a station close by them. The explorer is not far ahead of his fellow-colonists, as is well remarked by the \textit{Edinburgh Review} for July, 1862: - “Australian occupation has kept close on the heels of Australian discovery”.\textsuperscript{77}

This was encouraged by favourable reports, such as Hardman’s assessment that through Stuart’s journey:

One of the great problems of Australian discovery was solved! The Centre of the continent was reached, and, instead of being an inhospitable desert or an inland sea, it was splendid grass country through which ran numerous watercourses.\textsuperscript{78}

Stuart had successfully acted for the public good.

On July 25, 1912 a public banquet was held in the Town Hall, Adelaide, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of ‘the day on which John McDouall Stuart planted his flag on the shore of the Indian Ocean, having conducted his expedition across the continent of Australia’.\textsuperscript{79} His Excellency the Governor presided, with the State Premier, government ministers, the Mayor, several justices and 200 ‘other gentlemen’ present. Four of the five surviving members of the original expedition were honoured guests, together with several ‘later explorers’ of Central Australia.\textsuperscript{80}

The speeches made by these gentlemen spell out their formal view of the significance of the major phase of explorations in South Australia; the view that they wished to present at a time when the longer term influences of the

\textsuperscript{76} See Donovan 1981, Powell 1996.
\textsuperscript{77} Hardman in Stuart 1865: xix.
\textsuperscript{78} Hardman in Stuart 1865: x.
\textsuperscript{79} Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912: 29.
\textsuperscript{80} Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912.
expedition’s work could be gauged, but the expeditions were still within living memory.

John McDouall Stuart is held up in pride of place as ‘the prince of explorers’, a ‘man of real true grit’ as he was the first white explorer to ‘fix the centre of the continent’ and cross it ‘from sea to sea’, in the words of John Lewis, land owner in South Australia’s Far North, including Dalhousie Springs.81 The Governor of South Australia recalled how banners hailing the ‘band of heroes’ greeted the returning expedition in Adelaide, January 1863: ‘Here the conquering heroes come’; ‘Honour to the South Australian pioneers’. Mr AW Piper, President of the Royal Geographic Society said that they had ‘successfully passed through the hitherto unknown wilds of the Australian interior’ ‘making known the mysteries of this great continent’, and were ‘part of our national inheritance’.82 Mr Piper reviewed the changes that followed Stuart’s opening of a route through the centre, making it possible to ‘develop the advantages and resources of nature’s gifts, which Stuart and his followers have unfolded to our knowledge’.83

Unsurprisingly, there is no reference to the train of failed expansionism in the Northern Territory in the celebratory speeches made so soon afterwards in 1912. Instead they emphasise the utility of the established transport and communication route following the Overland Telegraph Line through the centre. Mr Piper states with confidence that in 1912:

we have cablegrams and telegrams coming across Australia every moment. We know that one can ride, drive, motor, or cycle from one end of the continent to the other, and never a day be without water.84

**The building of the Overland Telegraph Line**

The Overland Telegraph Line followed Stuart’s route through central Australia. Stuart himself had been ‘anxious to direct attention to the establishment of a Telegraph line along his route’ and had made notes about the availability of

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81 Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912: 42. Stuart (1815-1866) had been dead 46 years, and mention of his anti-social behaviour when not exploring (see Bailey 2006) was obviously uncalled for.
83 Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912: 38.
84 Piper in Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912: 37.
suitable timber, rivers and high country crossings. He was clear about the connection between his route-finding and the developments which would follow, wanting to ‘confer the benefit on my fellow-men of opening up a line for rail and telegraphic communication with England’. In turn, the orchestrator of the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line, Charles Todd, always saw the line as having the dual purpose of ‘opening up the unknown interior’ to land speculation and development and the ‘formation of settlement on the north coast’ for the benefit of South Australia, as well as providing communication. Todd advocated the land route even before Stuart had made his way through it.

Without Stuart’s lead, it is likely Queensland would have won the competitive construction contract for meeting the undersea telegraph line from the UK instead of South Australia. The line would have come ashore at Normantown and gone overland through Far North Queensland. If it had, we can assume that official settlement in central Australia, in the form of the Alice Springs hub that came into existence in the 1870s, would not have taken off until a much later date, perhaps the early 20th century, if it did at all. Thus the Overland Telegraph Line had a major impact on the spatial history of Australia. Physically, the first telegraph line was a 3000 km long single strand of No. 8 galvanised wire. Despite the apparent simplicity of that single strand, it was a technological achievement to construct it through difficult and unknown territory, in only two years. The continuity of the strand of wire depended on the line of supporting poles with insulators that connected Port Augusta in South Australia and Port Essington, now Darwin, via eleven repeater stations. Each station had a bank of batteries to power the morse code receivers and transmitters, and a staff to read and re-send the messages and to maintain all these structures. This major construction was also a political and territorial coup for the young colony of South Australia. The route and its attendant buildings, tracks and workers established a bridgehead into central, northern and western Australia. 

85 Stuart 1865: xiv.
86 Stuart, cited Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912: 36.
87 Notes from October 1860, cited in a public lecture by Todd in July 1873, SRSA 194/A2.
In its connection of Australia to the world, it was also a ‘great national work’. On Thursday 22 August 1872 when the line was joined, Australia entered the modern world. Until then, communications took the same time as the travel between two places - three months for a letter from Sydney to London in the 1850s. With the continuous ‘thin streak of wire’ came the capacity for instantaneous transmission of a message anywhere between Adelaide and Darwin, and seven hours for one to reach London. Remoteness was now not necessarily isolating, news could travel, commercial and familial relations with the rest of the world and British ‘Home’ could be fostered without the distortion of timelags. Distance was disconnected from time.

Under Charles Todd’s meticulous direction, responsibility for building the line was divided into three sections. The northern and southern sections were to be built by private contractors. The southern section from Port Augusta to Alberga Creek was contracted to Edward Meade Bagot, who took up the lease at Dalhousie Springs in December 1872. The central section, which was the least known and most difficult with the furthest cartages would be constructed by Todd’s government department. This started 100 miles north of Port Augusta and went to Attack Creek, so covered the western Simpson area. Several of the surveyors kept accounts of their experiences surveying for the line, amongst them Alfred Giles (1926 [1995]) and Christopher Giles (1894-95).

In Christopher Giles, there is an unusually sensitive observer (fig 2.18). He was a cadet on the Northern Territory Survey Expedition of 1868-70, and a surveyor in the central section of the Overland Telegraph Line and later worked on it as a telegraph officer. He published a long account of his work in the *South Australian Public Service Record* in the 1890s, based closely on his journals he kept while working on the line in the 1870s. He has a good eye for telling details and quirks of his work in general. He has an evident sense of humour about its difficulties. He also conveys unusual details concerning the colonial encounters in which the work implicated him and his fellow workers. He is noticeably free from prejudices of his times regarding Aboriginal people, providing amiable,

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88 Richards 1914: 5.
89 *Advertiser* 31/1/1910, Charles Todd’s obituary.
unjaundiced accounts, in which the full humanity of Aboriginal people registers. An explanation for this tone may lie in an early familiarity with Aboriginal people. He says he was ‘Accustomed to the natives from my boyhood and able to speak at least one dialect fluently’, that of ‘the Purrinjee west of the bend of the Murray River’, who taught him about their rain ceremonies.\(^{92}\)

### Images of Charlotte Waters

Throughout its 56 years of official service, Charlotte Waters was a necessary way-station for travellers of every kind. The building was a major feature in what was experienced as an otherwise hostile part of the landscape for travellers, who found it an oasis. It was a key point of entrance into the lower Finke area for non-Aboriginal observers and reporters. The nature of the place and of the visits to it set up a form of interaction between them that was conducive to documentation of those interactions. Clusters of photographs, sketches and diaries were made by those who travelled through, and letters and collections made by those who were longer-term residents of the area. Looking at how people have represented Charlotte Waters can reveal not only how it looked but about how it was seen at various times.\(^{93}\) It is noticeable that the sketches and photographs repeatedly record the same prominent aspects of the place – its public front aspect from which horses, camels and bullocks approached, together with the primary operational wires of the telegraph line. Some images show the sides of the building, the outbuildings, and the later photographs start to show it from the back.

The earliest available image is from 1875. It is Frank Gillen’s sketch in the journal he kept when travelling north for the first time as a 19-year-old.\(^{94}\) His ‘plan’ (fig 2.19) gives priority to the single telegraph pole carrying its all important single wire. It stands prominently at the front of the solid stone building with its steeply pitched galvanised iron roof, a large chimney, and a series of windows and air vents. At the back an equally solid wooden stockyard is shown. This simple ‘plan’ gives the raw, core image of the place as a building

\(^{92}\) C Giles 1894 Vol 3(6): 44.
\(^{93}\) See Lydon 2005: 3, 5, 6 and references, for a discussion of the status of photography in modern Western vision and Victorian approaches to photographs as impartial witness, depicting a transparent realism, at the same time being recognized as more intimate, personal objects.
\(^{94}\) Gillen 28 May 1875[1995]: 66, 68.
that supports the line, in a bare location, with its ancillary working structures, especially the stock yard. Photographers repeatedly focus on these details through the following decades. The images show modifications to the set-up of the station, however, which tell of the continual maintenance and technological upgrades undertaken for the upkeep of an operational station.
Fig 2.18: Portrait of Christopher Giles SLSA B 11348/28
A group of photographs of the station were taken by HYL Brown, the first South Australian Government Geologist, who was appointed in December 1882, so they date to later than that. He had a ‘passion for fieldwork’ which took him on extensive surveys and ‘pioneering explorations’,\(^5\) ‘accompanied only by a black boy’, ‘which would have done credit to any explorer’.\(^6\) These journeys would necessarily have taken him repeatedly through Charlotte Waters. His image SLSA B9848 (fig 2.20) shows the same perspective as Gillen’s sketch, with rough gibber-covered surface in the front, plus the details of a verandah with ornamental supports showing, a pair of water tanks at the end and a solidly built – perhaps camel proof? – wooden fence enclosing the station building. There is one metal telegraph pole, as in Gillen’s sketch. However, there are now two doors rather than only windows at the front, which was initially built with doors only opening into the defensible courtyard.

Brown’s photograph SLSA B11607 (fig 2.21) shows a ‘Group of officials and staff of the Telegraph Station’. The nine people, posed by Brown the official visitor, are grouped outside the home fence. A small gum tree has been planted behind them, in an effort to encourage something to grow nearby. The single telegraph pole has had a bulky protective fence built around it. On the verandah behind them can be seen a clerk’s desk, a drum and some boxes. The group shows the array of staff involved in running the station - a bearded Aboriginal man who would probably have looked after horses and stock, two young Aboriginal children who may have helped with herding the goats, a cook, wearing cap and apron, who looks Chinese, two European linesmen and the ‘officials’ - P.M. Byrne in white on the right and F.J. Gillen on the left. The verandah posts now have plain tops, with no decorative brackets.

\(^6\) Poem and comment by Robert Bruce in The Quiz 26 July 1900; cited by O’Neil 2007: 16.
**Fig 2.19:** Frank Gillen’s 1875 ‘plan’ of Charlotte Waters telegraph station, 1875, drawn in his journal of his first journey north as a 19-year-old to start work as a telegraph operator in Alice Springs. Gillen F. J. (1875)[1995]: 66.

**Fig 2.20:** Front view of Charlotte Waters telegraph station, c1880s, (after December 1882) taken by HYL Brown, SLSA B9848
A camel train transporting characteristically large loadings along the telegraph line track between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs stands in front of the building in another picture of this 1880s period, (SLSA B20979, fig 2.22). There is now a solid wooden pole taking the line into the building. The number of above-ground tanks has tripled, with an array of two lines of three galvanised tanks now at the side of the main building, to augment the original underground tanks. The bases of these are still extant on the contemporary site, having been cut down to form garden beds later, presumably because they rusted (fig 2.35). Taken from a similar angle, SLSA B22568 (fig 2.23) is dated to 1900. A drum and boxes stand on the verandah as they did twenty years before, with a trestle. A significant alteration, reflecting change in telegraph technology from one wire to two, is that there is now a pair of substantial double telegraph poles at the front. The insulators entering the telegraph office can be clearly seen on the roof. A ladder lies at the foot of the twin poles, for maintenance or perhaps completion of the poles. In his survey of the technology of the Overland Telegraph, FP O’Grady of the Australian Post Office states that it was in 1898 that ‘a copper wire was erected alongside the old galvanised iron wire between Adelaide and Darwin’. Also, a window at the northern end has been blocked in, implying a change in the use of the rooms there.

A ‘panoramic view’ taken from further away is given in SLSA B1429, showing the complex of outbuildings as well (fig 2.24). It is dated ‘ca 1880’; it must be the late 1880s as there are two wooden poles at the front, carrying two wires into the repeater station, and the trees around the station have grown. A white paling gate has been added, to allow easier access through the fence line to the front door. The path from this can still be seen on the surface of the contemporary site. Again the foreground shows a large expanse of rough gibber. At the far left there is a wooden fence – possibly around a water trough. The whole array of outbuildings can be seen to the left: A wooden slab hut with galvanised iron roof (cart shed), a stone 2 or 3-roomed building with a wooden lean-to (men’s quarters), a dog kennel, three small huts including one with a

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Fig 2.21: ‘Group of officials and staff of the Telegraph Station’, c1880s, (after December 1882) taken by HYL Brown. PM Byrne (in white) on the right and FJ Gillen sitting on the left. SLSA B11607

Fig 2.22: A camel train transporting large loadings along the telegraph line track from the railhead at Oodnadatta to Alice Springs, 1880s, outside the Charlotte Waters repeater station. SLSA B20979
Fig 2.23: Charlotte Waters repeater station 1900. There is now a pair of substantial double telegraph poles at the front. SLSA B22568

Fig 2.35: The cut off bases of the bank of water tanks, used as garden beds in the 1930s, presumably because they had rusted, on the site of Charlotte Waters, 1997
large low roof, the blacksmith, and the meat house and the meat-hanging gibbet. The picture is an informal snap, apparently un-posed, as it includes the intimate detail of a load of washing hung on the fence. Two camel carts can be seen at the far right. This image shows the same details of the back buildings that Spencer has drawn in his 1928 sketch (fig 2.25). These give a picture of the domestic life taking place around the repeater station, carting wood, doing the washing, preparing meals, looking after dogs and stock. Charlotte Waters was more than an official government outpost, at the same time it was home base to approximately five white and several Indigenous employees.

The domestic details of the lives of the Indigenous people who were camped around the station, but were not employed, are only shown in Gillens’s 1901 photograph (fig 1.14) and Theodore Bray’s 1927 images (see chapter 3 for further discussion).

The focus is broadened from the isolated station buildings in photo SLSA B1418, which shows a well-filled waterhole on the Coglin River which runs to the north Charlotte Waters (fig 2.26). The trees along the creek provided rare shade, and were the camp place chosen by the Horn Expedition, and one of the camps for local Aboriginal people. As Gillen notes while staying at Charlotte Waters in March 1901:

> The thin green streak of the Eucalytus microtheca which grows along the banks of the Coglin Creek one mile north of the station relieves the aspect in that direction and appears to mark a distinct change in the character of the country and its flora. 99

Better vegetated low sand ridges and mulga stands start to replace the flat gibber country beyond the water hole and the bore. Photo SLSA B19830, taken in the 1920s, shows the Charlotte Waters bore and water tank, on the other side of this creek, 1.6km from the station (fig 2.27). Water had to be carted to the station from here on a cart.

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Fig 2.24: A ‘panoramic view’, showing the complex of outbuildings, ‘ca 1880’. SLSA B1429

Fig 2.25: Baldwin Spencer’s sketch of Charlotte Waters in *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 1928, fig 82A facing p137
There is a gap in the run of photographs, with the next cluster dating to the 1920s. By this time Charlotte Waters was a post office and store. SLSA B45180 shows the back of the building (fig 2.28). An additional galvanised tank has been added. The elaborate finish to the courtyard gates, the stone work pointed and dressed, topped with ornamental spheres and decorative as well as strengthening rounded piers bonded into the walls at the corners can be seen. These testify to the superior finish and attention to detail invested in the initial building. It was not a vernacular building, but was the result of investment of extra effort, skill and quality materials. The detail of the courtyard construction is clear in two photographs taken by Theodor Bray, a photographer who journeyed up the telegraph line in 1927 with a party of tourists. A preferential use of the back entrance by vehicles is demonstrated.

This suggests a less formal use and approach to the building, the more private and messier out-buildings and courtyard now being in full public view, part of the main entrance. Yet another galvanised water tank has been added inside the courtyard – it is not there in 1925 (SLSA B64383/64 fig 2.29; B64383/66 fig 2.30).

The 1925 photograph (SLSA B62538, fig 2.31) was taken by Philip John Brewer, again travelling by motor car with a group of tourists, again shows the back. A standard view from the front of the building, dated to ca 1924 (SLSA B15448, fig 2.32), taken from further back shows that the outbuildings and the tanks at the north side are still present. The verandah post decorations have been replaced since the late 1880s, and painted. But the two prominent wooden telegraph poles have now gone, replaced by a thin pole to the northern end of the building. This is also visible in B45142 (fig 2.33), which gives an unusual view from the north side. This shows that the double row of water tanks is still in operation, at the attributed date c1928.
Fig 2.26: Coglin River waterhole near Charlotte Waters, nd, SLSA B1418
Fig 2.27: The bore on the Coglin River that provided water for Charlotte Waters, 1920s, SLSA B19830

Fig 2.28: Back of the telegraph station, a post office in c1920, SLSA B45180
The window behind them, blocked in 1900, has been reopened, again implying changes in the use of interior spaces. An additional pair of tanks has been added to the front of the building for the first time, underlining the shift in orientation of use of the building to the back courtyard entrance. The fence has also been altered, now running from the side of the house not beyond the tanks as it did in the 1880s. An unexpected alteration is to the large front chimney – it no longer has the four decorative finials at the corners. This may indicate that the chimney had been repaired after almost 60 years. In an undated photograph possibly taken by John Flynn (NLA 597467 fig 2.34) from the south side, the chimney is similarly without decoration, and the struggling tree at the south side has become a stump. The two c1928 tanks are not present here, so it may be earlier.

Single photographs of the repeater station tend to emphasise its lonely isolation. Those photographs taken by people who knew the place better, who re-visited, show it more as more lived in, with inhabitants and their domestic detail. Only Brewer and Gillen took photographs of the Aboriginal camp in the creek line half a mile away (see chapter 1 and 3).

Looking at the whole run of photographs generates a sense of the building in active use, being maintained with the investment of energy, planning and money, appropriate to its importance, and the imperative of keeping it in good operational condition – there was no redundancy in the repeater station system. It is modified according to changing technologies – two wires instead of a single wire – and to changing transport needs. In the 1920s, the orientation of the building altered, the courtyard used as the public entrance to the post office and shop, not the front path, perhaps because that is where cars parked. The constant battle to provide enough water is seen in the ever-increasing population of tanks in addition to the distant bore and an underground tank. All the materials for these alterations had to be brought in on camels or horse carts, and later train and trucks, from Adelaide.
Fig 2.29: Back of the telegraph station showing courtyard detail, SLSA B64383/64, by photographer Theodor Bray, 1927

Fig 2.30: Back of the telegraph station showing courtyard detail, SLSA B64383/66, by photographer Theodor Bray, 1927
Fig 2.31: Back of the telegraph station, taken by Philip John Brewer. ‘Staff and visitors outside travelling by small truck and car’ SLSA B62538, 1925

Fig 2.32: Front view of Charlotte Waters c1924 SLSA B15448
Fig 2.33: An unusual view of Charlotte Waters from the north side, SLSA B45142 c1928

Fig 2.34: Homestead, Charlotte Waters Overland Telegraph station, NT, lantern slide used by Rev FH Paterson, north South Australia, part of Australian Inland Mission collection, possibly taken by John Flynn, undated, dates between 1905-1920. nla.pic-an24165519. NLA 597467
There are undoubtedly further details of construction and use that are not recorded in the textual descriptions and files that can be gleaned from these photographs. The overriding impression that the photographers caught, and pass on to contemporary viewers, is of the solidity that the construction presents. Fuelling that was the confident intent on the part of its planners and builders that the building would be as strong, enduring and commanding as it was functional.

**Further explorations from the Overland Telegraph Line**

In 1870 the closely settled districts were almost all within a 70 mile radius of Adelaide, south of Clare (fig 1.16). It was a time of radical demands for land reform. The sale of lands was an important part of government revenue – they needed more, cheaper land to sell, and there was demand. Exploration continued, a series of explorers using the Overland Telegraph Line as a launching place, going west and east into the remaining ‘great spaces on the map’. Several of these journeys took in or bordered the western Simpson area. David Lindsay (1856-1922) was a South Australian explorer, surveyor, draftsman, land, stock and station agent, and later broker on the Adelaide Stock Exchange, whose occupations follow the links between exploring and land development profits. In 1885, accompanied by a Wankanguru man, Paddy, he went eastward across the dune field on camels from Smiths Yards via *mikeri* wells that he was shown, to the Queensland border and back. His description assisted in the wells relocation by Denis Bartell and visitation by Mick McLean, Luise Hercus and Clark in the 1980s. He later summarised that ‘even with camels it was difficult to cross’ this country. Winnecke had certainly found it so in 1883. He explored a route across the northern Simpson from Beltana, Farina, Coopers Creek to the Hay and Mulligan Rivers, and Mt Hawker, which he considered the centre of Australia. He describes how ‘our camels are completely done up. I am not at all surprised; no other living animal could travel over such a stretch of barren sandridges as we have come over the last week or two. ... the camels always lie down as soon as they come to a sandhill,

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100 Hirst 1973: 81.
102 Lindsay 1886.
103 David Lindsay in Royal Geog Soc of Australia 1912: 45.
and generally require a good deal of persuasion before we can induce them to cross over.”

His sentiment was exactly echoed by Madigan, who after his 1939 crossing of the Simpson from Andado Station to Birdsville defined a desert as ‘any area that is difficult and dangerous to cross with camels’. He made his difficulties publicly available in a newly immediate way, pioneering the use of mobile radio communication to broadcast on national radio from Simpson Desert dune camps.

However, Mr EA Colson who lived locally, at Blood’s Creek station, made his self-funded crossing with five camels and ‘a black boy’ Peter Aines, to Poeppels Corner and Birdsville after the drought had broken in 1936. He reported that ‘so green and succulent was the feed that my camels, after being eight days without water on my eastern journey and twelve days on my western return, only took quite a normal drink on coming to water’. ‘All things considered I had a most interesting and pleasant crossing both ways. I was agreeably surprised at many conditions I noted.’

HV Barclay initially sought to open a stock route across to Queensland in 1904-5, going east from Anacoora bore, but due to the sea of sand dunes he was turned northwards, where he mapped the Plenty, Hay and Hale Rivers.

Recent explorations continued with oil exploration in the 1960s which led to the creation of the French track across the dune field that 4WD travellers now follow, and the establishment of Purnie Bore. Mineral exploration was active in the 1990s, Bingey Lowe, Brownie Doolan and other Irrwanyere Elders providing advice on the locations for drilling that would not disturb significant places.

104 Winnecke 1884: 4.
106 Madigan 1946.
107 Colson 1936: 1211.
108 AA A1 1938/961 Correspondence relating to Colson’s crossing of the Simpson.
109 Barclay 1916; Madigan 1929: 4.
Revival in camel exploration

When Robyn Davison trekked from Alice Springs to the western Australian coast with a dog and four camels in 1977,\(^{110}\) it was an unusual decision, not just because she was travelling alone, but because camels had been used less and less since the 1930s, replaced by rail and roads built in the 1920s. They were declared a pest in 1925 due to the numbers of released camels going feral.\(^{111}\) But as travel through the desert has become increasingly reliable and widely available using 4WDs, in the 1990s there was a revival in popular interest in camel travel through the Simpson Desert.

For example, The Outback Camel Company currently offers a string of pack camels to carry supplies and equipment, appealing to the historical resonance of travelling in this way, which ‘enables us to travel almost anywhere in the true style of the explorers of the 19th and early 20th centuries’. They ‘honour the tradition of the pioneering ’Afghan’ cameleers who played such a crucial role in the exploration, development and sustenance of inland Australia. Our camels represent the last living link to the golden days of exploration by camel in Australia.’ Madigan’s west to east dunefield journey is reprised, but without the anxiety of unfamiliarity and finding water, camel feed and the correct direction. The Outback Camel Company is a commercial business, but its goals are personal engagement with the desert and with its camel-associated travel-based history, minus the hardships of lack of water. The organisers display an atunement to the desert based in having developed a contemporary familiarity with it. The experience of the travel itself is the goal, they are not aiming to extract profit from any other property of the desert:

The ultimate Australian desert experience would have to be our Simpson Desert Expedition – a complete west-east crossing of the Simpson Desert. This magnificent journey, the world’s longest and most challenging commercial camel expedition, takes 28 days to cross the over 1000 sand ridges from Old Andado Station in the Northern Territory to Birdsville in western Queensland. ...

Trekking with the amiable, charismatic camels offers an intimacy with the soul of the country that is completely absent when travelling by vehicle. You will discover that the pace of nomadic life will re-awaken your senses as they become attuned to the life, beauty, diversity and moods of the surrounding desert. You will not forget  

\(^{110}\) Davidson 1995.  
\(^{111}\) Stevens 2002: 267-284.
the camaraderie, the seemingly endless vistas, the brilliant evening
glow of the stars, the captivating serenity of the day and pure silence
of the night, and of course the remarkable attributes of the camels.  

'New forms collected and facts noted' \(^{113}\)

There has always been a fuzzy divide between land exploration and the pursuit
of scientific description and knowledge. Inland explorers and surveyors ‘made
up the forward guard of observational scientists whose notes and specimens so
greatly extended the knowledge of the country’s physical and organic life’.
They made their own records and brought back collections. They needed to
know geology and botany in order to assess the mineral and pastoral prospects
of the country they passed through.  

The earliest descriptions of rocks and botany written by authorities in the UK are published as appendices in
explorers’ journals.  

For example, Stuart’s expedition was accompanied by Mr
George Waterhouse, who was the founder and curator of the South Australian
Museum (established 1856). He was ‘a clever naturalist’ who collected fossil
*Diprotodon* bones at Hergott Spring, birds, freshwater snails and plants.  

The Overland Telegraph Line opened a ready route into central Australia, and
acted as a magnet for exploratory, scientific and welfare-oriented expeditions.
As well as the impetus for a new phase of central Australian exploration, it
formed a data collecting frontier.  

Most of these expeditions had to pass
through Charlotte Waters. Each expedition or investigator produced a flurry of
text, sometimes with illustrations and photographs, which provide differing
perspectives and descriptions of the region, often amidst long periods where no
one mentions the area. Each expedition was shaped by its driving cluster of
expectations and the interpretative skills and background of its members. These
generated differing sets of preferred places selected to visit, and of ways of
reading what was encountered. They organised what people paid attention to,
and how they considered it was appropriate to behave there. In my own
journeys in the area, depending on who was with me and their specialist fields
of knowledge, and hence the particular kind of pattern recognition that they


\(^{113}\) Spencer 1896: 23, commenting on the work of the Horn Expedition 1894.

\(^{114}\) Jones 1996: 23.

\(^{115}\) Moyal 1976: 54-5.

\(^{116}\) Stuart 1865: xxi.

brought to the area with them, I would see the glitter of tiny spider’s eyes in the
dune fields where a entomologist shone a torch, or the silhouette on a branch of
a rare grey falcon pointed out by ornithologists, or old flood levels in a soil
profile with the geo-archaeologists.118

These were shaping influences on the historical sources relating to the region;
one which underlies the diversity and patchiness of those sources. In turn, the
resulting ‘sources’ often had a broad impact on the national image and popular
understandings of the region. Roslyn Haynes points to Gregory’s 1906 *The dead
heart of Australia* as being especially influential, as his writing was both scientific
and personal, and provided an opening for public cultural reassessment of the
desert and of Aboriginal people.119 Spencer and Gillen’s anthropological
publications were globally influential (see chapter 3). The Horn Expedition
reports both fuelled and reflected a growth in popular interest in Australian
natural history and the distinctive qualities of central Australia.120 At the same
time, local stories also continued to be told. Occasionally these have been
captured in published local histories;121 they rarely contain Indigenous
perspectives or accounts.122

The Horn Expedition 1894: scientific not fiscal gain

The Horn Expedition was unusual in that it was funded as a philanthropic
exercise on the part of William Austin Horn, a wealthy South Australian
pastoralist and mining magnate, with no primary goal of land profit or mineral
prospecting.123 It was the first primarily scientific expedition to study the
natural history of central Australia. Rather than individual explorers trekking
across the desert, for ten weeks in 1894 five scientists: Professor Tate (geology
and botany); Dr Stirling (anthropology); Professor Spencer (zoology and
photography); Mr Watt (geology and mineralogy) and Mr Winnecke (surveyor
and meteorologist)124 travelled 3000km on camels from Oodnadatta through the

118 Robin 2007 also describes this phenomenon in a team of specialists travelling in the eastern
Simpson area.
120 Griffiths 1996.
121 For example, the stories of the Overland Telegraph Line in Hollitt’s ‘History of some of the
eyearly settlers and pioneers of South Australia’ nd: 145-160.
122 Shaw (1995) overtly set out to counter this.
124 See Mulvaney 1996: 5.
Finke River basin to Alice Springs and the Macdonnell Ranges. They were assisted by two collectors and taxidermists, a camp cook, four cameleers and Aboriginal guides. The Expedition's findings were described and illustrated in a four volume report, published in 1896.\(^\text{125}\) They made a quick pass through Dalhousie Springs, stopping at the homestead and the springs close to it, camping at the way-station that Charlotte Waters offered.\(^\text{126}\)

One of the most significant outcomes of the expedition was the meeting of Baldwin Spencer, the Oxford trained biologist from Melbourne University with Frank Gillen, then Post and Telegraph officer at Alice Springs. They formed a lasting and rewarding working partnership, and friendship. With the assistance of Patrick Byrne, telegraph officer at Charlotte Waters, they collected and studied the fauna of central Australia, and wrote their seminal series of books about the Aboriginal people in Central and Northern Australia.\(^\text{127}\)

Spencer and Gillen organised a year-long journey in 1901, taking advantage of the transect through central and northern Australian Indigenous countries that the Overland Telegraph Line presented. Logistically it was a great boon, providing ease of access and communication, and postage for returning their collections.\(^\text{128}\) Their work on this expedition and the involvement of the two men from Charlotte Waters who accompanied them, Erlilikilia and Purunda, is discussed in chapter 3.

Other scientists organised their own specialist explorations along the line. The ornithologist S.A. White travelled on camels with his wife from Oodnadatta, through Dalhousie, Charlotte Waters and the western Simpson area in 1913, collecting birds and observing aspects of the social life along the line.\(^\text{129}\) A special South Australian government expedition was mounted to Mt Dare station in 1938 to investigate a report of a group of human skeletons found near the Finke River floodout. Popular belief alleged that these might be the remains of Leichhardt and his party, lost in 1848. In the Adelaide newspapers, amongst

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\(^{125}\) Spencer 1896.
\(^{126}\) Spencer 1896: 16, 23.
\(^{128}\) ‘Our work was much facilitated by the existence of the isolated telegraph stations on the overland line to Port Darwin’ (Spencer and Gillen 1904: ix).
\(^{129}\) White 1914.

132
the news of the late 1930’s gathering global calamity, are reports of this minutely planned inter-disciplinary scientific expedition

Skeletons of eight men, believed to be possibly those of the members of the Leichhardt expedition, which left Moreton Bay 90 years ago to cross the Continent from east to west, have been found in the Simpson desert by Mr Edwin Lowe and his son Rex of Dalhousie Springs and Mt Daer stations. ... Adelaide authorities were unanimous last night in saying that an inspection by experts would be the only way of deciding the matter.¹³⁰

The State Government was besieged with applications from interested organisations asking that their representatives should be allowed to join the party, but the Government intends to keep the number to a minimum.¹³¹

The team of experts and luminaries that was assembled was led by Archibald Grenfell-Price, the president of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, with AD Smith (surveyor), TD Campbell (physical anthropologist), CP Mountford (ethnologist), AC Kinnear, (a press reporter), George Ritchie (state parliamentarian) plus a radio operator. They travelled by train to Abminga siding, where they and their mound of boxes and equipment were collected by Edwin and Rex Lowe, and taken to Mt Dare homestead, at that time a homestead built of split logs. They then travelled on camel and horse across gibber and sand dune to the site, east of Ewillina waterhole and Anniversary Bore, and the Finke River where it turns south (fig 2.36).

Like Spencer and Gillen’s expedition in 1901 (see chapter 3), the expedition made the most of all the latest 1930s technologies. Mountford recorded songs with recording equipment in three large cases that needed to be moved on a donkey cart, and filmed the work with a cine camera as well as prolific still photographs. Noteworthy for the time was the expedition’s direct radio broadcasts from the field; the spectre of Leichhardt had captured great public interest in the expedition’s findings. Their broadcasts stressed the remoteness and difficulty of access of the location ‘situated as it is, just inside the first sandridge in the unexplored Simpson desert’.¹³²

¹³¹ Adelaide News August 4 1938.
The team were not successful in finding the bones of Leichhardt. On inspection, it was immediately clear that the much discussed ‘bones’ were merely calcified tree roots. However, they had come a long way and brought a huge amount of equipment and expectation with them, so they set out an excavation grid in 10 x 10 foot squares regardless. They dug in six inch spits, sieving the sand, cursing the flies and the heat. Amazingly, in this randomly selected site, they did find a cluster of objects: human tooth fragments and other post-cranial bone fragments, an iron packsaddle ring, steel fragments and some pieces of stitched boot and saddle leather. Even more remarkable was their recovery of a 1841 Maundy Thursday threepenny bit, dating to the year that Leichhardt left England, and a 1817 half sovereign, which had been used as a pendant. These, particularly the Maundy money, were rare coins anywhere, let alone on the edge of the Simpson Desert, with only a restricted number specially issued each year.133 ‘All of this required explanation. Nobody in the expedition could provide it, nor could anyone else in Adelaide, and nor has anyone satisfactorily since.’134

133 Grenfell Price 1937-38.
134 Jones 2007b.
Fig 2.36: Map of the Leichhardt Search Party expedition, from TD Campbell's papers donated by Bob Edwards to the South Australian Museum. Courtesy of Philip Jones, South Australian Museum
The presence of these objects does testify to the cumulative density of human life taking place in the dunes, particularly in the Finke floodout area. Philip Jones, in his review of the expedition, concludes that it may well have been the historical burial place of an Aboriginal person. It is puzzling that no one considered this possibility at the time. That they did not underlines the overriding strength of their pre-conceptions.

Mountford’s diary accounts of the expedition are full of descriptions of food, from a detailed account of the table settings at the Governor’s luncheon held for the team to descriptions of how to cook steak on a shovel on open fire. He also ‘visited the native camp’ at the back of Mt Dare station. He was told about the stone arrangements at Ewillina, related to the Carpet Snake, and at Moorilperinna, related to the Urumbala, by the Lower Southern Arrernte station workers. The party travelled to see these, photographing and mapping them. A valuable by-product of the visit to the area was Mountford’s recordings of crayon drawings by Lower Southern Arrernte men, a series of ceremonial songs and the ‘explanation’ of two stone arrangements at Ewillina and Moorilperinna.

Bingey Lowe remembered stories of the ‘dead bones’, when I asked him about the expedition. He said that they were found by Aboriginal stockman, who took Ted Lowe out to see them. Bingey told stories of the people on the expedition, and the finding of parts of a buggy and a sovereign. He mused:

    Just like that Cap’n Cook, that Leichhardt, he in Townsville, he everywhere, how many Cap’n Cooks, how many Leichhardt’s?

His observation captures the mythic quality attached to early explorers, or to the idea of them, which was sufficient to invoke a major Leichhardt Search Party from a scatter of calcified roots in a Simpson Desert dune. At the same time, his wry reflection breaks down the absoluteness of this foundational

135 Jones 2007b.
136 Mountford diaries 1938, H.L Sheard collection, Rare Books and Special collections State Library of South Australia.
137 The Urumbula brings to life a whole line of country from MacDonnell ranges to Pt Augusta through the lake Eyre Basin to the Finke floodout area (Hercus and Potezny 1996: 10).
138 Mountford and Campbell 1939. Mountford’s photographs in the H.L Sheard collection, Rare Books and Special collections State Library of South Australia.
139 Mountford and Campbell 1939.
140 Macfarlane field notebook 28 October 1996: 45.
myth. Re-interpretations of Captain Cook stories in Indigenous perspective fracture Cook’s unitary hold on the origin of nationhood,\textsuperscript{141} and here show up a disproportionate interest in lost explorers over the broader history of the western Simpson area, which was rarely the subject of enquiry.

This lack of enquiry was targeted in a distinctly non-mythical, pragmatically investigative expedition on much the same scale as the Leichhardt Search Party, organised in 1985.\textsuperscript{142} Like the Leichhardt Search Party, this left the Overland Telegraph Line and focused on the Dalhousie Springs. A comprehensive multi-disciplinary study, with only scratch funding, it reported on the geology, hydrology, botany and zoology of the springs to provide a baseline of information for future management and conservation in the newly declared National Park. It included an account of an Ancestral Perentie story, part of which is closely associated with the landscape features of the springs.\textsuperscript{143} A useful background European history was written by Cohen, a Scientific Officer with the South Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service.\textsuperscript{144} A preliminary archaeological assessment of the Dalhousie springs, setting the rich evidence of late Holocene stone artefact types and sediments there in the broader context of arid zone archaeological sites and paleo-environmental information for the arid zone, was undertaken by Ron Lampert.\textsuperscript{145} This set of studies remains a solid point of reference for any research on mound springs in general or the Dalhousie springs in particular.

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Apart from science, the other primary motivation that led to expeditions into the area and the recordings that they generated were those concerned with documenting the conditions of Aboriginal people. The Presbyterian minister Reverend James Robert Beattie Love, (1889-1947) had a teaching job at Copley, north of the Flinders Ranges which took him into arid South Australia, and in 1912 he accepted an honorary, unpaid commission from the board of missions of the Presbyterian Church of Australia to investigate and report on the condition of the Aborigines and possible locations for mission work among

\textsuperscript{141} Rose 1984; Williamson and Harrison 2002: 3-4.
\textsuperscript{142} Zeidler and Ponder 1989, published by the South Australian Museum.
\textsuperscript{143} Potezny 1989.
\textsuperscript{144} Cohen 1989.
\textsuperscript{145} Lampert 1989; also Lampert 1985.
them. He was a missionary in Western Australia, where he learnt the local language and wrote a number of books, and in Queensland. In 1937 he returned to South Australia to help establish the mission at Ernabella in the Musgrave Ranges, where he lived from 1939-1946. Although only 23 years old when he travelled through the western Simpson area, he gives specifics of living conditions and rations, and the views of pastoralists, that are rarely recorded in the area.

Another traveller in the region at this time was the Reverend Bruce Plowman. A self-described ‘itinerant preacher’, he was a bush Padre for the Presbyterian Church’s Australian Inland Mission. He travelled on a camel between Beltana in the Flinders Ranges and Tennant Creek in the north, a six-month round trip, made repeatedly between 1912 and 1917, when he was in his late 20s. His work was part of the vision of Rev. John Flynn, providing pastoral care for the 400 members of the Central Australian white population at that time. His expenses were paid, but his labour was given voluntarily:

He gave people whatever help they needed at the time of his visits: he was barber, nurse, stockman, school teacher, piano tuner, furniture maker, companion and friend; he also baptised, married and buried those who needed such services whatever their denomination. He also conducted church services.

His journals provide a lively and affectionate anecdotal picture of the lives of people in the area and descriptions of the country in the early twentieth century. He had no maps to follow, but steered by pastoral tracks and mud maps between one place and the next. His ‘ports of call’ included Dalhousie homestead, Federal, Tin Shanty, Mt Dare, and Charlotte Waters. His charter did not extend to the Aboriginal people as Flynn and the church considered that they were catered for by the existing missions.

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146 Love 1912-14 PRG 214 Series 6. See also Love 1915, but this published version of his report is less useful as it summarises and generalises his observations for broad regions rather than locating them in specific places. His moral judgments are dominant, for example: he advocates the need for ‘rescuing and uplifting boys and girls … doomed to a life of vice, sloth and disease’ 1915: 32.
147 JH Love 1986.
151 Plowman 1933: 30.
152 Plowman 1933: 60.
Very little was known about the health of Aboriginal people on South Australian pastoral stations north of Marree to Charlotte Waters. Dr Herbert Basedow was commissioned by the Federal Minister for Home and Territories to report on their status in 1920. He and his wife, a nurse, travelled in a camel-cart owned by the Department of the Engineer-In-Chief. Basedow had recently been reviewing the health of people in the north-east of the state for the South Australian government, and on the Nullarbor to the Western Australian border, and offered to continue the work. He visited Dalhousie Springs, Bloods Creek and Federal stations amongst many other Far North stations. The influenza epidemic of 1919 was ‘disastrous’, with a high death rate. Basedow treated cases of many diseases, with eye conditions being the most common, many chest infections, burns, breaks and venereal diseases. He records serious injuries received by employees on pastoral stations in the course of horse breaking, having with no compensation in return but ‘prompt dismissal’. To improve these conditions, Basedow made recommendations for ‘systematic medical control of the aboriginal population’ and for more reservations to be set aside ‘for the exclusive use of the aboriginal owners of the land’.

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Artists seeing the desert

The many photographs of Charlotte Waters examined above are a reminder that textual descriptions are only one part of the body of representations of the western Simpson Desert. Roslynn Haynes’ *Seeking the Centre* reviews the history of representation of central Australia by artists and writers. She points out the visual emphasis in European culture, which uses surveys, maps, pictures to represent and eventually to own the land, rather than understanding it though involvement in it.

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155 AA CRS A3 item 22/2805 1921: 59.
156 AA CRS A3 item 22/2805 1921: 50, 30.
Certainly, when talking about the past, I repeatedly found myself asking Bingey Lowe what the country ‘looked like’ to him when he first saw it or when he returned to it after travelling. He had no aesthetic answer, instead a qualitative judgement. He would say it was ‘good country, hard, but good’; aesthetics was not a relevant criteria for assessment. I was inadvertently focussed on surface appearance rather than lived experience.

The aesthetics of the desert are now an important part of the draw of the country for tourists, but were slow to emerge from expectations based in very different concepts of landscape. Haynes says that the European landscape tradition lacked ways of depicting the desert, which was experienced as a series of absences, of people, history, civilisation. It did not offer recognisable sites for identification, and it all appeared the same (as discussed in chapter 1 and 2 above).

It was Hans Heyson in the 1930s, painting in the Flinders Rangers who began to lead a shift to a greater familiarity with arid scenery and the ability to see ‘barrenness as beautiful’.  

Portraitist Violet Teague hired a Studebaker and driver in 1933 and travelled from Melbourne to Hermansburg via Oodnadatta and Charlotte Waters, producing an exhibition of sketches and water colours, her work being the earliest production of such art seen by Albert Namatjira.  

In 1993, John Wolseley, who has worked extensively in Central Australia, created a series of lithographs called ‘The Simpson Desert Survey’, printed at the Australian Print workshop, Melbourne (fig 2.37). They incorporate notes on the process of dune formation; geological notes on stratigraphy; depictions of rocky ridges; camel’s tracks; archaeological stone artefacts and hearths; vivid drawings of trees with solid pools of shadow; delicate studies of the structure of Zygochloa cane grass; plots of the path of a bird’s flight; and hand-written notes from his own observation, such as the poetic simile of ‘Stream of budgerigars – more like an electric current than anything physically solid’. In his study of the artist’s work, Sasha Grishin says a watercolour in the same series called ‘A  

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159 Hoorn 1999.
160 An edition of these prints is held at Araluen Gallery, Alice Springs where I saw them.
natural history of sand dunes - Arrernte Desert, 1992-3’ is ‘on one level a
documentation of various types of sand dunes … but on another level, is an
investigation into the life of the dunes and life in the dunes.’\textsuperscript{161}

It is significant that Wolseley has selected the anthropologist’s Indigenous
presence-oriented name for the desert over the geographer’s expeditionary
name. He says:

I have hoped that in my attempts to map certain ideas about the
desert I can produce works which subvert the traditional strategies of
map-making. The cartographic devices and methods used by earlier
explorers – whose aim was to colonise and find uses for the country –
I have appropriated to de-claim the desert; to find out
what the desert does to me rather than what I or my sponsors can do
to it.\textsuperscript{162}

Wolseley spends long periods camped alone in the desert while he works on
these records and images, physically excavating through the surface of the dune
to expose and explore the fossil dunes, calcified tree roots and the burrows of
scorpions and birds beneath. ‘Sand as a metaphor for the palimpsest of life,
concealing earlier layers of existence yet preserving their traces, is a constant
recurring theme in Wolseley’s work.’\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{161} Grishin 2006: 85.
\textsuperscript{163} Grishin 2006: 86.
Fig 2.37: John Wolseley, 1992-3, watercolour. 'To reveal and conceal, Arrente Desert', from Grishin 2006: 52.
His work is at once delicate and tough. His involvement brings to his images of the desert understandings of its character that ‘contradict the anticipated image of barren desolation’.\(^{164}\) They trace the ‘many interweaving lines of movement’.\(^{165}\)

His vision is inclusive of the traditions of the lone explorer, the observing scientist and the engaged desert dweller. For me, he comes as close to bridging the insider-outsider relation to the desert as an outsider can, or at least to depicting the elements that are involved in building that bridge. He understands, and has found ways to represent, the flows, multiplicities and dynamism of entangled places.

**Simpson Desert as home**

The Simpson Desert was ‘home’ for thousands of generations of Wankangurru *mikiri-nganha* ‘people from the wells’ and Wankangurru *mungathiri-nganha* ‘people from the high sandhills’, who were permanent residents of the Simpson Desert. In 1901, the last people born and living there walked out to Kilalpanina mission, on the eastern side of the Simpson sand desert (see chapter 4).\(^{166}\) Luise Hercus is clear when she says the Wankanguru ‘had total occupation of the area, they made use of every possible resource, there was no wasteland, no empty country, no “desert”. Everything “belonged” both in practical terms and in mythology’.\(^{167}\)

The western Simpson is still home, emotionally, spiritually, to Aboriginal people descended from people of the Wankanguru and Lower Southern Arrernte language groups.\(^{168}\) And, in distinct ways, it is also a home to European pastoralists such as Molly Clark of Old Andado, the station located deepest into the western side of the Simpson dunefield, or Boof Smith, third generation pastoralist at New Crown station. Even late arrivals such as the Mt Dare lessees, artists such as John Wolseley or researchers such as myself might claim affiliation and emotional bonds to the place. But it is not home to us. Our

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\(^{164}\) Grishin 2006: 85
\(^{165}\) Grishin 2006: 86.
\(^{166}\) Hercus 1985; 1990a: 154.
\(^{167}\) Hercus 1990a: 149.
\(^{168}\) eg Ah Chee 2002.
affiliations stem from different systems of valuing the country, different expectations of it derived from our available knowledge bases, and experience.

The next chapter works at a smaller, local scale and a finer level of detail. The varying textures of interaction with the desert and with other people that are created by the application of the differing knowledge bases they bring into the western Simpson are my focus below. While still based largely on accounts from outsiders looking in, I have sought details that move closer, go deeper into forms and processes, hopes and sensations of life in the western Simpson Desert, especially in the context of the changes that followed from the incision of the Overland Telegraph Line through it.