

Interlude 6: the otherness of Australia

In the long-ago days of my schooling, considerable efforts were made to make us feel part of Empire; Britannia ruled the waves and much besides. The heads of English monarchs were to be found on our coins and banknotes. (They're still there!) There was a division in our minds which we found hard to put together. By 1939, when I first attended primary school, most Australians knew perfectly well where they belonged. My parents had a farm, most of Father's family were on the land, and the land was fundamental, not only to people like ourselves, but to the nation's economy. It was said that we rode on the sheep's back, and we did at that time. But what did we publicly think about the land? That's easy. It had been gained for us by our explorers, brave if often ill-fated men, who had gone out and found what was there, and claimed it for The Crown. Or themselves, of course. Exploration was as much a business of poking around in the bush to find good places to settle as it was a matter of official parties. People still spoke respectfully of Burke and Wills, instead of calling them the fools they were. As children, we did what we were told; we drew outline maps of Australia, suitably empty, then used blue to colour the surrounding sea. Next, we drew lines across the emptiness – Sturt went here, McDouall Stuart there, and other lines showed the journeys of Giles, Kennedy – killed by treacherous blacks! – Major Mitchell, Strzlecki, and so on. It was many years before I realised that the land had been known with intimacy and understanding for thousands of years, and that the heroics of the men we were taught to laud was no more

than ignorance in love with itself. To me, today, the questions about the explorers were - why didn't they ask? Why didn't they simply watch, and learn? Why didn't they know they were intruding?

The land was peopled by those who had known it for many thousands of years. The blanks on those little maps we drew, the emptiness, was an emptiness in the minds of the explorers, the committees that sent them out, and, for that matter, the educational authorities who told the children in their care that the explorers had found this and that. The nullity of *terra nullius* was in the minds of those who taught it. What masqueraded as teaching was the passing on, the excusal, of ignorance.

I feel ashamed, today, to have been duped in this way, but I suppose I can say that my recovery from this state of ignorance, decades long, has given me an approach to the essays in this series. Each of the next three books has something to do with this business of getting to know the country in which we live, to understand it, to know that for us, at least, it is the centre of the world.