

Encounters with stones

George Main¹

We've had a hilltop fenced, to exclude sheep. A stony rise peppered with ancient white box trees. Sturdy, gnarled branches hollowed by time, cherished by birds, possums, sheltering their young. The fencer lives nearby, on a farm called Heaven. These paddocks, fertile slopes of productive red clay, north of the Murrumbidgee River in southern New South Wales, are heavenly. Such gentle terrain, waterholes on Pinchgut Creek, yellow box with monumental trunks, heartwood and bark and sap, lively records of so many seasons.

In the 1830s, the newcomers knew its value, its capacity to produce. Absentee squatters deployed men to establish stations, to extract and export the wealth of the land. Landholders found ways to eliminate barriers to the creation of pastoral income. Writer and poet Mary Gilmore grew up in the region in the 1870s. As a child, she heard talk of a hired killer on Mimosa, 30 kilometres west of Retreat, who tracked and shot dead a Wiradjuri man for taking a sheep. Her poem 'The Hunter of the Black' suggests the scale of bloodshed and trauma.

Tomahawk in belt, as only adults needed shot,
No man knew how many notches totalled up his lot;
But old stockmen striking tallies, rough and ready made,
Reckoned on at least a thousand, naming camps decayed.²

The hill rises beside Pinchgut Creek, on a farming and grazing property called Retreat. Recently I took a friend there, an arid zone ecologist. We camped in the shearers' quarters, planted hundreds of seedlings under the elderly white box trees on the hilltop, into earth dark and moist. One white box tree had sprouted a vigorous shoot near its base, the first time in almost two centuries that new growth so close to the ground will escape the mouths of sheep. The shoot will grow large and bushy, eventually sheltering land and its life from harsh winds. 'This country has a feeling about it', my friend said, 'a sense of nurturing'.

Agnes, my grandfather's sister, left Retreat homestead for the nursing home about ten years ago. We called her Toot, a childhood name bestowed by her parents beneath their homestead's corrugated iron roof, beside the washing line, in the shade of peppercorn trees, on the grazing property her father and uncle bought before she was born. Frail, she'd fallen inside the homestead, spent hours inching across the floor, to finally reach the phone. Later, she'd taken a wrong turn driving back from town, one bleak winter night. The police eventually found her, in a dark paddock, inside her car, cold and confused.

There'd be no return to the old pise house where Toot had lived all her life, astride a low rise beside Pinchgut Creek, the wide verandas, a flowered and fruitful garden, red earth holding Murrumbidgee water pumped from Gumly Gumly to the concrete tank on Rooster Hill, then delivered by gravity to enliven zinnias, violets, roses, beans, grapes. So the family gathered to sort, divide, and disperse a household

collection, accumulated and treasured across generations. We came also to reflect, to mourn. Together, we opened our hearts to a place that had nurtured us all, since our lives began.

That afternoon, I found the first stone. Days later, I tried to capture something of the event, in words.

Over the ramp
Dust rises behind
Galahs together fly and call
Calling brightly of grassy paddocks
Of graceful yellow box
Holding centuries

Memories of summertime
Violets, soft purple
Metal sprinklers dribbling Gumly water
Dappled shade
Red earth
Bees

On the veranda
In the paddock
Black jays cry from Toot's ironbark trees
Ethereal and spare
Caressing our souls
As I walk to say goodbye

Another family leaving
Our presence lifting
Only a couple of generations
Like the land losing its memory

Tide of yellowed grass flows in
From the house paddock of ancient trees and fallen grey limbs
A kookaburra laughs
Toot sits in the nursing home, dozing
Keeping her mind on the here and now

Electric light in the ironing room
We open and pass dusty books
To the children at Retreat
Galahs call in sunshine outside
Memory returns

For this love of place is not like other loves
Freya says
A loved being or thing or idea is held by us
Held in our arms, in our imagination
Our love casts a glow around it

But a loved place holds us
Even if it exists only in memory
It causes everything within it, including ourselves, to glow
A loved place is not encompassed by our love
We are encompassed, loved, breathed into life, by it

*Many of us sense this accommodation
Sense that we are indeed received
And feel a huge but nameless emotion in response*

On the verandah
In the paddock
Black jays cry from Toot's ironbark trees
Ethereal and spare
Caressing our souls

Late afternoon sun
And the wheaten taste of beer
Beer and dazzling sunlight
Numbing embrace

Below Rooster Hill
Towards elderly white cypress
A forest Mary called her cathedral
Between wire fence and heavy crop
A river stone, mottled

Sun-warmed in my hands
One side smoothed
The other indented
Someone ground seeds here
Crushed ochre?

Losing a place
But keeping our lives
Our futures
Unlike, perhaps, the last person to hold this stone

On the veranda
In the paddock
Black jays cry from Toot's ironbark trees
Ethereal and spare
Caressing our souls
As I walk to say goodbye

The homestead was emptied of all its contents, boards fixed to protect the coloured glass windows (never liked by Mary, Toot's mother) of sinuous, art nouveau design, either side of the front door, and the garden gates opened to allow sheep to graze down the weeds and native grasses in case of summer fires. A few years later Toot died. We honoured her life, and declared our gratitude, inside the old weatherboard church on the other side of Rooster Hill. Soon afterwards, the family sold the homestead, and its surrounding paddock of venerable eucalypts.

Weeks before the new owners moved in, we arrived at the back gate to tidy the garden, to say our final goodbyes. I dug up some dense clumps of asparagus, descendants of plants that Toot's father had sown above the shallow grave of a dead horse, its decaying body building rich soil in which the vegetable would thrive for eighty years.

Then, we found the second stone. I was walking in the back gate, where homestead residents and visitors had frequently walked for more than a century. At my feet, half embedded in the soil, was a stone axe head, one side carefully ground down to form a sharp cutting edge. Ground edge stone axe heads are easily recognisable, always

picked up and displayed, or stored away. Extraordinary, unbelievable, that no one had ever noticed or retrieved it.

After some discussion, we decided to bury the axe head under a nearby peppercorn tree, its trunk swollen with age, its low, dense foliage giving shade and shelter. We took photographs to record the stone's particular size, shape and colour. With a spade we made a hole, and formed a gentle nest of native grass, before my daughter carefully placed the artefact.

A short distance downstream from the homestead stands a voluminous woolshed and its accompanying shearers' quarters on part of Retreat now owned by my parents. My father is managing the restoration of the quarters, a set of corrugated iron and weatherboard buildings that haven't hosted shearing teams since the late 1960s, when faster cars and new bitumen roads allowed shearers to commute daily from nearby towns. The woolshed and quarters were built by Goldsbrough Mort, a pastoral financing company, about a decade before my family bought the property. Retreat had comprised part of a vast grazing empire consolidated by the Donnelly family, who failed to stay afloat during the economic depression of the early 1890s.

About a year after we found the axe head at the back gate of Retreat homestead, my parents were showing an old family friend through the quarters, a heritage architect with a longstanding fascination for the old woolsheds and homesteads of the Murrumbidgee region. They opened doors, gazed into paddocks through dusty windows, and considered closely the patinas on timber walls of flaking paint. They talked about how best to care for the site, to maintain its significance, to preserve its stories, and to allow new stories to grow.

Then my father encountered the third stone. He'd walked out the kitchen door to locate an old coin they'd discovered weeks before, on bare earth trampled by generations of sheep and pastoral workers, towards the creek. At first, he didn't recognise the stone as an axe head, but it looked unusual, so he bent to pick it up. Unlike the second stone, but like the first, the third wasn't buried at all. 'It was as if a big black hand had reached down', my mother told me, in awe, 'and just placed it there.' When my father realised that he held a stone axe head, 'I had this weird and very moving feeling of holding something significant, last held by a human hand maybe centuries ago', he later wrote.

How and why, we wondered, did three rare, handcrafted stones appear before us at Retreat? Each encounter had unfolded at moments when our hearts and minds were opened to this cherished place, opened by loss and sadness, by care and love. These were times of change and uncertainty. How might we best engage with and tend these paddocks and buildings, these spaces and structures for so long bound to modern systems of commercial, industrial production? Could the appearance of the stones have been a response from the country itself, from the mysteries and powers that it holds, to our openness, to our vulnerability?

Last weekend I photographed all the pencil inscriptions and drawings made by shearers on the internal walls of the twelve bedrooms inside the long dormitory building. Many shearers had written their names, and their home districts. We're planning to contact their descendants, and invite them all to a barbeque lunch, to inspect the completed renovations, to honour the experiences and lives of their fathers and grandfathers, and of the families who waited to welcome them home. Some of the shearers were Wiradjuri men from Darlington Point, the location of Warangesda, a mission established on the Murrumbidgee River by Reverend John Gribble in the early 1880s.

Agricultural development transformed the ecological and social realities of the southwest slopes of New South Wales after the extension of the Great Southern Railway

from Sydney in the late 1870s. Jobs vanished for Wiradjuri stockmen as patchworks of small farms and ploughed earth swiftly erased the grassy woodlands of immense pastoral stations. Dispossessed families made a fringe camp outside Cootamundra, a town east of Retreat.³ 'Arranged with police to help me get the children tomorrow', Gribble noted in his diary after arriving in Cootamundra in January 1882.⁴ According to the *Cootamundra Herald*, the missionary departed for Warangesda with fourteen 'mostly young Natives'.⁵

It may be that one of the Wiradjuri men from Darlington Point who shored sheep at Retreat, who slept in the quarters and wrote on a bedroom wall, had a father or mother taken from Cootamundra by Gribble. If not, his life was marked by the same forceful colonial processes that imposed such harm, that severed children from their families at a camp outside Cootamundra in the summer of 1882. Before us, at Retreat, there are connections to uncover and make, relationships to initiate and grow. The stones, perhaps, are calling us to seek connectivity, to open possibilities for reconnection, for regeneration, for reenchantment.

Notes

1. George Main works as a curator and environmental historian at the National Museum of Australia. He is the author of *Heartland: the Regeneration of Rural Place*, published in 2005.
2. Mary Gilmore (1969 [1948]), 'The Hunter of the Black', in *The Passionate Heart and other poems*, Angus and Robertson, , pp. 66–8.
3. Peter Read (1994 [1988]), *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State*, privately published, Australian National University, p. 35.
4. John B Gribble, 1882 diary, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, MS 1514/1, Item 3.
5. 'The Warangesda Mission,' *Cootamundra Herald*, 4 February 1882.