

Connecting and reconnecting: Tracing some intersections between senses of genealogy and senses of place

Anne Elvey¹

In June 2000 I made my first trip into the Northern hemisphere. In the late afternoon I travelled west from Melbourne across the continent of Australia with the setting sun. Just north of the equator I stopped for a night and a day in Singapore and travelled on to London in a prolonged night to land at Heathrow with the rising sun: a journey from a Melbourne winter into summer in the lands where my ancestors had lived before their arrival in Australia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a journey neither my parents nor many in the earlier generations of their families have made. In pilgrimage of sorts, I had begun to keep added a little to try to find at least England, Scotland various ancestors interest in these in Maidstone, miles from Tralee in somewhere in the bright in Scotland – by my sense that born and where I now lived in Melbourne, Australia, is first of all Wurundjeri land. So I travelled with a mixed sense of colonial displacement, embeddedness in my Australian place of habitation, and indebtedness to the places of my ancestors.



preparation for this called on those who our family story and research of my own those places in and Ireland where had lived. My places – Sandy Lane England; twenty Kerry, Ireland; area of Kirkcud- was aroused in part where I had been

I was also travelling to a conference on Environmental Values in Cork, Ireland. The journey to ancestral sites, sometimes the failure to pinpoint such sites precisely, and the journey to a site of thinking about environmental values came together in a question about the way in which my sense of genealogy might intersect with my sense of place. Does the travel out of place that marks the genealogical pilgrimage separate us further from place or offer a point of re-engagement in place?

There is already much concern in contemporary Australian culture with re-negotiating senses of place: such negotiations are often shaped around developing

¹ Anne Elvey is an honorary research associate in the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research within the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University. She is also membership secretary for Friends of Merri Creek. Even when overseas, she feels most connected near oceans and waterways, but her deepest sense of connection is to the Australian land, especially the area around the Merri Creek and Yarra River in Melbourne, but also to parts of Western Australia and the long stretch of southern country that lies between Melbourne and Perth.

a sense of belonging or identity amid the multi-cultural and Indigenous experiences of loss and reclamation in relation to place. In Melbourne in 2001, the centenary of federation, a number of contemporary exhibitions related to this theme: *?Lost and Found: A shared search for belonging*, under the joint auspices of the Immigration Museum and the Koorie Heritage Trust was open between May and November; *Quilted Journeys: Stories of Immigration*, was on display at the Immigration Museum between May and August; while *Belonging: A Century Celebrated* was on show at the State Library of Victoria. Each offered participants and visitors an opportunity to reflect on their relationships to place in Australia. Place has also become important in ecological contexts, such that bioregionalism, for example, calls us to become engaged with place in such a way as to exercise ecological sensitivity toward and care for particular local places within which we are embedded and engaged. How might such senses of place be affected by contemporary genealogical quests? The construction of a genealogy makes connections in particular ways. If the genealogical quest is not to become an end in itself, it may be worth looking at the ways in which our wider cultural stories influence our telling of family history and then to consider the ways in which our ancestral stories might come to convey and develop our own senses of interconnectedness with place.

Genealogy as sacred story

Since I have been trained in biblical studies, as I pondered these questions I was drawn to consider the ways in which the Bible itself has travelled out of place. From its emergence in ancient Middle Eastern and Mediterranean contexts over hundreds of years between two and three millennia ago, the Bible in its various forms has been carried by Christians and Jews into the colonies of the 'New World'. For the exhibition "*?Lost and Found: A shared search for belonging*", Neil McLeod, Anton McMurray and Gordon Huang have created an artwork, "*When the Saints Come Marching In*", that expresses something of the impact of Christian uses of the Bible in the European colonisation of Australia. The exhibition catalogue describes the work as portraying "a broken culture". Red owls, which represent "the traditional story tellers", move toward "the new culture", represented by a Christian minister who looks like a bishop on his white horse. The passage of change is represented by a broken pot, through which the owls move. The notes also tell a traditional story of some boys who tortured an owl. The Wandjina, "the most powerful of the spirit ancestors" sends a flood to drown the boys, but they are rescued by a kangaroo. When they jump inside the pouch, however, the kangaroo changes into a Boab tree and they are trapped inside forever. A missionary who is told this story dismisses it as a joke: "You must learn the new ways and forget those old stories, learn about Jesus and the Bible."² The artists here have identified the traditional story-tellers

² All quotations and references in this paragraph from J. Geia (ed.) (2001), *?Lost and Found: A shared search for belonging* Catalogue (Two exhibitions that provide an opportunity to reflect on the potential for new relationships between Indigenous and [other] culturally diverse Australians. 17 May to 11 November 2001, Immigration Museum; 1 May to 30 June 2001, Koorie Heritage Trust) p. 17. (my inclusion)

with the tortured owls. Christianity and its ministers are implicated as agents of a colonial violence occurring through a displacement of Indigenous ancestral rememberings in favour of their own biblical ancestral narratives. In the catalogue "When the Saints Come Marching In" is set beneath Neil McLeod's painting, "All They gave Us for Our Land is a Blanket Once A Year". The cultural displacement, of which the Bible is *one* emblem, has frequently accompanied a physical displacement, namely the theft of the land.

At the same time, with the Bible came symbols and stories that have shaped the ways in which many non-Aboriginal Australians have understood their relationships to this place. The myth of a lost Eden, for example, has figured powerfully in an Australian colonial imagination. Roland Boer sees this happening in three ways. In some cases the land is seen as lying outside the primeval goodness of creation untouched by the divine. In other cases the land exemplifies the curse that accompanies the loss of paradise. Alternatively the land is re-imagined as Eden itself.³ The myth of a lost Eden appears in Australian family history narratives, such as Judith Wright's *The Generations of Men* which, in a novelised form, presents a biography of her grandparents, May and Albert, based on their own journals. At the beginning of the narrative two Australian sites are invoked: the small cottage of May's parents and the larger Dalwood of May's grandparents. Bearing 'the almost English serenity of establishment'⁴, Dalwood is an Australian Eden. In contrast England is a "country unknown". But this other place from which May's grandparents emigrated also becomes for descendants, such as the child Wright imagines her grandmother to have been, a relegated Eden from which "all good things" come.⁵

The imagining of this latter Eden is accompanied by a forgetting of the economic, political and social circumstances that necessitated a migration, forced or otherwise, to Australia. This forgetting is expressed in the way narratives such as *The Generations of Men* begin in this place. The emphasis on a new beginning gives a sacred feel to the ancestral narrative. A similar effect is seen in Frederick McCubbin's *The Pioneer* (on display in the National Gallery of Victoria on Russell). Painted just three years after federation, this work presents an Australian narrative of origins founded in a conjunction of family, national and sacred histories. The way in which the figures are clad in the colours of the bush seems to be a claim that this is their place, they belong here.⁶ The triptych form, traditionally used for religious themes, implies a sacred origin underlying this genealogy of place and nation told through a family narrative.⁷ In a similar vein Graeme Davison comments on 'the traditional, and

³ R. Boer (2001), *Last Stop before Antarctica: The Bible and Postcolonialism in Australia*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, pp. 117-19.

⁴ J. Wright (1995), *The Generations of Men*, revised edn. (originally published 1959), HarperCollins, Sydney; Amsterdam; New York, p. 2.

⁵ Wright, *The Generations of Men*, p. 5.

⁶ Certainly *The Age* of the day read it as such. *The Age*, 16 August 1905, quoted in J. Clark and B. Whitelaw (1985), *Golden Summers: Heidelberg and Beyond*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia, p. 149.

⁷ See, Clark and Whitelaw, *Golden Summers*, pp. 148-9.

often explicitly religious, character' of genealogically-inspired family reunions. The 'original point of settlement' is a customary site for such gatherings.⁸ But Wright makes the connection with biblical religion explicit. Describing May's perception of her settler grandparents, Wright notes that their story had about it 'something of the atmosphere of the Book of Genesis.'⁹

Genealogy as response to loss

Replete with ancestral narratives, the Book of Genesis itself displays a particular form of this story of new beginnings. Within the biblical story, the loss of Eden in Genesis 3 and the subsequent narratives of 'crime and punishment' in Genesis 4-11 are interspersed with a series of genealogies.¹⁰ Genealogies appear as new beginnings after stories of loss, disaster or estrangement: Cain's murder of Abel; the devastation of the flood; the fall of the tower of Babel. When they interrupt the narrative, these genealogies offer points of continuity with earlier narrative and genealogical texts within Genesis. But as interruptions they mark their separation from these earlier narratives and genealogies. In so doing they present a repeated possibility of a new point of origin.

As responses to loss, biblical genealogies suggest a further loss. These lists of successive generations of fathers and sons, usually highlighting the first-born male, forget the role of the maternal in human re-generation. In Genesis 4 the body of Eve is an emblem of human continuity and capacity for life in the face of human limitation. But as the Genesis narrative progresses, the maternal body is displaced by a genealogical pattern of birth to the male (Gen. 5, 10, 11:10-32). This biblical forgetting of the conditions of birth has parallels in a colonial forgetting of the conditions of settlement: the displacement and dispossession of Australia's first peoples and the socio-political contexts of migration. Moreover, the illusion of a genesis in this place obfuscates the particular relationship to place of its first peoples.

At the same time, however, Wright's *Generations of Men*, for example, bears a thread of mourning for the displacement of Aboriginal Australians. And in biblical genealogies, the role of the maternal is not wholly forgotten; the Hebrew word for genealogy, *toledot*, is from the same root of the word for the maternal act of giving birth, *yalad*. So the biblical genealogies preserve while they forget the *maternal* conditions of their possibility. Similarly, through the thread of mourning and the nostalgia for a place left behind, colonial family history narratives such as Wright's preserve as they forget the *material* conditions for a genesis in this place.

⁸ See G. Davison (2000), "Ancestors: The broken lineage of family history", in *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards, p. 85.

⁹ Wright, *The Generations of Men*, p. 5. In a similar vein the summary on the cover of Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* asserts that his novel "could fittingly claim to stand as the Australian Book of Genesis". See P. White (1956), *The Tree of Man*, Penguin Books, Middlesex.

¹⁰ The designation of these episodes as narratives of 'crime and punishment' comes from M. G. Brett (2001), *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity*, Routledge, London and New York.

So losses resonate in the telling of genealogy. The pioneer woman in the first panel of McCubbin's painting is imagined as holding the memory of the lost place.¹¹ But the male pioneer will bring a new Eden into being through his labour. Meanwhile in the third panel the grave of these pioneers becomes the foreground for the vision of paradise regained.¹² In Wright's story, set to work the land at fourteen, Albert loses the possibility of developing his scholarly gifts, but never completely loses his uneasiness with the 'work of the land.' Later, when May is widowed, she stands as a multi-talented woman who must as a matter of survival for herself and her family prove herself in a male domain. There is here a wider story in which the masculinisation of the 'work of the land' does violence to the aspirations and abilities of many men and hides the talent for land-work of many women.

But in telling these family histories, there are also other losses. These are settler narratives in which the stories of Aboriginal women and men are largely unremembered. Jane Haggis comments on "the ease with which whiteness takes its own invisibility and whitens out the 'others'".¹³ For descendants of early British settlers, the genealogical quest could be construed at one level as a whitening out of the 'others'. My mother's great grandfather travelled from Maidstone, Kent, to Western Australian in the 1850s. I learned relatively recently that the land the colonial government gave him to 'settle' is Balardong country. Genealogical connection with place, however tenuous, is all the more unsettled by the incommensurability of this connection in relation to Aboriginal dispossession. Judith Wright confronts this loss when she retells her family history in *The Cry for the Dead*, as a story of her ancestors' complicity in the displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal people.¹⁴ The 'cry' of her title is the ritual cry of Aboriginal mourning. Though of different weights, the loss described by Aboriginal dispossession and displacement is also a loss for the descendants of settlers, a loss of who we imagined ourselves to be.

The exhibition, "?Lost and Found", considered earlier, however, calls the notion of loss into question. The question mark which opens the exhibition title asks us to reconsider what is lost and what is found in the telling of Indigenous and non-Indigenous engagement in this land. The genealogical ambiguity with respect to loss might suggest a desire to escape loss, to deny violence,¹⁵ but the repetition of the genealogical pattern indicates the impossibility of escape. While contemporary genealogical quests, by non-Indigenous Australians such as myself, may be simply a postcolonial escape from the woundedness of this place, can they be, like Wright's *Cry*, a movement toward another way of relating to place?¹⁶

¹¹ *The Age*, 16 August 1905, quoted in Clark and Whitelaw, *Golden Summers*, p. 149.

¹² *The Age*, 16 August 1905, quoted in Clark and Whitelaw, *Golden Summers*, p. 149.

¹³ J. Haggis (2001), "The Social Memory of a Colonial Frontier", *Australian Feminist Studies* 16, no. 34, p. 92.

¹⁴ J. Wright (1981), *The Cry for the Dead*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

¹⁵ On this point, see S. Schech and J. Haggis (2000), "Migrancy, Whiteness and the Settler Self in Contemporary Australia" in J. Docker and G. Fischer (eds), *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, p. 232.

¹⁶ For the notion of 'wounded space' I am indebted to D. B. Rose (1996), "Rupture and the Ethics of Care in Colonized Space", in T. Bonyhady and T. Griffiths (eds), *Prehistory to Politics: Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton Sth., Vic. pp. 190-215, 261-3.

Genealogy and the agency of place

From the early days of European colonisation of Australia, the land has challenged our stories about ourselves. Although in Western cultures there has been a long tradition associating women with nature and identifying land as female, Roland Boer suggests that in Australia a different experience intervened. Because of the supposed hardness of the land, for early explorers, Boer finds that the land becomes a masculinised other against which to prove one's own male fortitude, its mysteries exclusive of women.¹⁷ As explorers gave way to farmers, predominantly male labour became a symbol of this struggle with the land.

Human labour, exercised in the struggle to domesticate this so-called 'uncultivated wilderness', was biblically sanctioned. In *The Cry for the Dead*, Wright argues that Genesis 2 and 3 as well as English custom lent authority to the establishment of a nexus between cultivation and ownership of land. The implication was that uncultivated land was unowned 'wilderness' and thus open to possession by the colonisers.¹⁸ The myth of a lost Eden intersects with the focus on cultivation. The colonisers very often found cultivation difficult; the land seemed to resist their efforts; their dreams of a new Eden were undone by a sense that the land had never been Eden at all, or if it had it was now lost. Thus the land itself unsettles the settler impulse.

Within family histories such as Wright's novel *The Generations of Men*, the land, therefore, can be read as an agent. Not only does the often tragic struggle to cultivate the land, in order to prosper or simply to survive, become the focus of such stories, but the unpredictability and sheer range of the land shapes these histories. A difficult journey across the distance of the Queensland landscape and down the coast is the journey toward death of Wright's grandfather Albert. As his final illness takes hold, the wind is felt as an enemy while the brolgas are excruciatingly beautiful. The land in its way is overwhelming.

Telling ancestral narratives of place

So how can we speak of our connectedness to place? A resistant land that enters settler genealogies with its overwhelming beauty and threat is a strange site of connectedness. The wounding of this space by settler violence toward both Aboriginal people and land troubles our impulses toward connection. I suspect that there can be no lasting connectedness with place without a connectedness to our histories in relation to place. But how can we tell these histories in a way that confirms and strengthens our care for place?

Early this year I read Kim Scott's *Benang*, a novel based on his own family history but told as a counter-story to the linear narratives of settler family stories.¹⁹ At a recent lecture in the Alfred Deakin series, Scott, who describes himself as "one

¹⁷ Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica*, pp. 85-87.

¹⁸ J. Wright (1981), *The Cry for the Dead*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 29.

¹⁹ K. Scott (1999), *Benang: from the heart*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.

among those who call themselves Nyoongar”, relates his experience of local genealogists: “In the archives I [was] also jostled by local historians elbowing one another to claim an ancestor as the ‘first white man born’ in such and such an area.”²⁰ In settler terms, the ‘first white man born’ is symbolic of a genesis in this place. In *Benang* Scott unsettles the desire to establish a settler genealogy by connecting this desire with experiences of Aboriginal dispossession and assimilation. In a narrative that meanders through places and times of Nyoongar country and the Aboriginal narrator Harley’s family history, the identity of ‘the first white man born’ continually shifts. This shifting echoes the failed desire of Ernest Solomon Scat, the narrator’s non-Aboriginal grandfather, and of A. O. Neville to produce through their own brand of eugenics ‘the first white man born’ of Aboriginal descent.

The country of which Scott writes is in the South West of Western Australia. As I read his book, I was aware that not so far from there, around Northam, Toodyay and Goomalling, was the Balardong country ‘settled’ by my ancestors. In 1999 when I visited Toodyay for the first time I felt a sense of recognition that I did not feel when I visited England or Ireland. But I was aware, too, that there were stories I did not know. Our family histories did not tell of what our coming meant for the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area. One day on another visit I hope to learn more. I can envisage a family history like Wright’s *The Cry for the Dead* that tells another story. That will be another kind of pilgrimage. For I do not live there and have little understanding of the land in that area.

I was born and have spent my life in the suburbs of Melbourne. I live now between two creeks, the Merri and the Moonee Ponds. Writing of Merri Creek about two kilometres to my east, John Anderson says: “The country is making/ something different of all of us.”²¹ This is a large claim, but it comes from a writer attentive to the details and resonances of place. Nevertheless, a focus on the agency of the land in our ancestry with respect to place could become an excuse for neglecting the claims to place of Australia’s first peoples. How do we hold both together in our contemporary quests for a sense of place?

I think perhaps there are three kinds of ancestral narrative that we need to tell about place. The first is the story of our coming to this place and tells of the circumstances that prompted a migration: the hopes, the promises, the tragedies and losses which give context and continuity, and connect the ancestral places left behind with the coming to this place. The second is the story of our involvement in the wounding of this place: the dispossession and displacement of Aboriginal people and the destruction of local environments that occurred as a result of our coming. The third is the story of our connectedness to our current places of habitation: the ways in which the places where we have lived and worked have acted on us, the patterns we see in these interactions.

²⁰ K. Scott (2001), “Australia’s Continuing Neurosis: Identity, Race and History”, *Alfred Deakin Lectures*, Melbourne Town Hall, Monday May 14, 2001; transcript and audio at *Radio National* websites: (http://www.abc.net.au/rn/deakin/content/session_6.html and <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/deakin/stories/s291485.htm>).

²¹ J. Anderson (1995), *the forest set out like the night*, Black Pepper, North Fitzroy, p.12; see also *PAN* No. 1 (2000), p.21.

How might the three come together? For myself I can imagine water as a medium of connection. From Kirkcudbright Bay in South West Scotland, the waters around the Dingle Peninsula in Western Ireland, and the river Medway that flows through Maidstone in Kent I see my ancestors gathering. They are labourers and convicts. There are unsubstantiated stories of lords down on their luck or disowned by their families. They travel by sea to Australia and some eventually settle around the River Avon in Western Australia, others by Melbourne's Yarra. Beside the Yarra are gathering places of the Wurundjeri. There are signs now along the Yarra bank that remind me of this. I surmise that the banks of the Avon are gathering places for the Balardong. There is so much more to learn.

I grew up in a byside suburb of Melbourne. With the beach ten minutes walk away we rarely went elsewhere for holidays. Our summers were spent by the waters of the bay. Now my life is bound up with the life of the Merri Creek. This is the waterway that shapes my sense of place. Somewhat naively last year when I was before a State Planning Panel I couched my objections to the proposed Craigieburn Bypass in terms of the agency of Merri Creek in shaping my sense of place. What different planning decisions might we make if we took seriously this agency.

This is not yet a genealogy of place. I need to spend time with the other-than-human ancestors of the place: river red gums hundreds of years old and ancient rocks worn down by the Creek. There are younger kin representing the ancients: this season's growth in the Craigieburn grasslands; the spawn of native frogs in the Somerton wetlands. Among those who replant local indigenous plants along the margins of the Creek, engage in weed control and litter clean-ups, and monitor the water quality, there are human kin in groups such as Friends of Merri Creek. Such groups have their own ancestral stories. I imagine my genealogy of place as something of a web of complex ancestries. While it might include an imaginative engagement with the ancestry of my birth family and their places, this is one thread in the web. With the agency of place, this web includes the agency of human and non-human others who have taught me in various ways to recognise my connectedness with place.

Family trees

As I began to think about intersections between senses of genealogy and sense of place, I became aware of the way in which the term genealogy is used in philosophy and the history of ideas. There is, for example, Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*. This use of genealogy seemed a long step from the more concrete genealogy of a family tree. Yet despite the organic metaphor, family trees are also a kind of abstraction. In Australia while many of us are busy constructing family trees, we bulldoze trees, some of them quite ancient, at one hundred times the rate we plant them.²²

²² The statistic about the rate of our bulldozing trees was reported by A. Hodge, "Wasteland of empty promises", *The Australian* Friday 8 June 2001, p. 14.

The biblical legacy of our own settler narratives suggests that our genealogical engagements are highly ambiguous. Yet genealogical research is more than a nostalgic passtime disconnected from the claims of place. For some Aboriginal Australians genealogical research is now part of an attempt to reconnect with family in the wake of policies of forced removal of Aboriginal children or to support their claims to native title. But the linear concept of genealogy such research implies can be in tension with a network-like system of kinship that characterises Aboriginal family narratives.²³ Among the Aboriginal people of Yarralin, for example, genealogies are part of a wider kinship structure that describes relationship to country.²⁴ For other Australians the construction of a genealogy and the rituals of research and travel surrounding that construction involve shifting geographies. Connections with places of habitation are re-negotiated in relation to ancestral places that are no longer (if they ever were) our place. This kind of genealogical quest also unsettles the idea of an origin, by continually deferring the point of ancestral origin. There is always another great, great, ... someone to seek. The seeking itself prompts questions about ancestry and origins. Sometimes genealogical research is like a game, but a game in which connections are sought and celebrated. The energy of this desire for connections can take us in unexpected directions.

Gwen Harwood's poem "Mother Who Gave Me Life" takes the deferral of origins in the direction of an other-than-human ancestry. Harwood writes of "the wild/ daughters becoming women" and imagines her way back through the generations of women "to monkey bosom, lemur breast", inviting her readers into another ancestral space.²⁵ This, too, is a thread in a wider genealogy, an ancestry we share as members of an interconnected and diverse Earth community. One challenge perhaps is to recognise this ancestry in the specificity of our relationships to those places we have left behind and, above all, those which we are now seeking, truly, to inhabit.

²³ H. Goodall (1999), "Telling Country: Memory, Modernity and Narratives in Rural Australia", *History Workshop Journal* 47, pp. 160-90.

²⁴ See D. B. Rose (2000), *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*, paperback edn., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 74-89, 110-22.

²⁵ G. Harwood (1990), *Selected Poems*, further revised edn. Angus and Robertson, an imprint of HarperCollins, Sydney and Auckland, pp. 161-2.