

‘All I know is history’: Memory And Land Ownership In The Dudley District, Kangaroo Island

Rebe Taylor

Three moments of discovery

1.

One day in July 1954, Joan Maves was at home in Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, reading a copy of the popular magazine *Walkabout*.¹ There she found an article titled ‘Last of the Tasmanians’. Under the heading she saw a photograph of her Grandfather Joe and her Aunt Mary.

Joan was shocked. But she was also confused, for the caption claimed the photo was of Tom Simpson, the ‘well known ... last Tasmanian half-caste of Kangaroo Island’ and his daughter. Joan did not know that Tom Simpson was her late great-uncle, but she remembered Grandpa Joe and Auntie Mary well. It must have been a mistake. She put it aside and did nothing about it.

2.

Four years later Joan’s ten-year-old son, James Maves, was reading the *Australian Junior Encyclopaedia* when he came across an entry titled ‘The Old Sealing Days’. It gave a brief history of the sealing industry in the Bass Strait and on Kangaroo Island. But what really interested James was this statement:

It has been claimed that the last full-blooded Tasmanian aborigine was not Trucanini, who died in Hobart in 1876, but Mrs. Seymour, who died at Hogg Bay, Kangaroo Island, at a great age in 1906.²

James was intrigued: not only was Kangaroo Island mentioned but Seymour was his grandmother's maiden name. He asked his grandmother if they were descended from Mrs Seymour. She told him that they were, but she told him no more.

3.

Two years later, in 1960, Richard Tyler was in Adelaide reading the *Chronicle* newspaper when he came across a letter from an Edward Barnes [pseudonym] of Kangaroo Island.³ Barnes was responding to an earlier article in the *Chronicle* claiming that Mary Seymour had been the 'last Tasmanian full-blood ... to die'. Barnes wrote that Mrs Mary Seymour had in fact been a 'half-caste' Tasmanian Aborigine. He gave a brief history of Mary's family, beginning with her parents and concluding with a tribute to the youngest of her nephews, 'Tiger' Simpson, who had died in 1955. The name 'Tiger' brought an unexpected jolt of recognition for Richard. Tiger was his much-loved and well-remembered uncle; was he really of Tasmanian Aboriginal descent? Another connection was made.

—

There had been no Indigenous population on Kangaroo Island, but sealers had been visiting since Matthew Flinders officially discovered it in 1802. An estimated five hundred individuals visited there before the South Australian Company arrived in 1836.⁴ By the mid-1820s, around forty people remained living on Kangaroo Island, made up largely of Aboriginal women from Tasmania and the adjacent mainland, and former sealers.⁵ It was not until the early 1980s that James Maves and David Tyler, acting independently, began to research their family histories in the archives and the libraries. There they found out that they were descended from Betty, a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman taken to Kangaroo Island by sealers in

about 1819, and Nathaniel Walles (Nat) Thomas, an English sailor who jumped ship on the island in 1824.

I came to learn about this history as a child. Shortly after my family arrived in Adelaide from London, my parents met a couple who invited us to stay on their sheep farm at the southern end of Antechamber Bay, in the District (or Hundred) of Dudley, Kangaroo Island.⁶ We found the place wonderful, and returned every summer holiday.

Their farm had been the home of Nat Thomas; indeed their house, the oldest occupied house in South Australia, had been built by him. The farming family had been there since the 1950s, but their neighbours had been there since the 1850s. So they could tell us stories about Nat, about the Aboriginal women and about Betty's daughters, Hannah and Mary. These stories were recalled by places on the farm with special names: places such as Old Joe's Grave, Wab's Gully and Lubra Creek. We would walk to these places and remember the stories as we went.

The Lubra Creek crossing is my favourite place. It has a soft white sand floor that dips under a canopy of melaleucas. However blustery, it is always still and quiet. The light filtered by the trees' narrow leaves is soft but remarkably clear. The farmer told us Lubra Creek had been a stone tool factory of the Aboriginal occupants of Kangaroo Island from thousands of years ago. We often found Aboriginal flint stones turned up by the sheep in the sand. We were also told it had been the gathering place for the Aboriginal Tasmanian women of Dudley. But an uglier story loomed at Lubra Creek: an Aboriginal woman had tried to swim from the creek's mouth across Backstairs Passage to escape home. On realising she couldn't make it, she turned back. There she was caught by Nat Thomas and beaten 'for her troubles'.⁷ These words have echoed through the generations of telling. Their brutality could turn the serenity at Lubra Creek into an eerie silence.

With these stories in my mind, I chose this history as the topic for my Masters thesis in 1993. In a local history of Kangaroo Island, I read Joan Maves was living in Kingscote, and could be contacted care of the Kingscote Post Office.⁸

Joan Maves was happy to see me when I arrived a few months later at her home. With my dictaphone turned on, I

began to ask Joan my questions. Did she know the same stories that I heard as a child? Did she know the farm at Antechamber Bay well? Had she inherited any Tasmanian Aboriginal language or traditional culture? I was insensitive with curiosity. Joan knew none of these. She told me of her discovery of her ancestry in 1954 and showed me the pile of books, and archival references that James had found for her. James told me his own story when we met in Adelaide a few days later. A year later, when I met Richard Tyler and his son David in Adelaide, I found a similar scenario: Richard's story of discovery and their wealth of researched information, mostly collected by David.

An obvious question arose from these encounters with the Maveses and Tylers: why had they known nothing of their ancestry? Joan and Richard shared similar responses: their parents had never told them, nor ever discussed their history, because (they supposed) of a sense of shame and fear. Joan and Richard had themselves, they told me, never experienced racism or exclusion first hand. They considered their parents' feelings as having been generic to the times in which they lived. Nonetheless, I wondered if there had been something more specific that had inspired the fear.

I also wondered how the Maveses and Tylers had been deprived of their history, while I had come to know about (some of) it as a child. To answer these questions, I returned to Antechamber Bay, to find out how the stories there had remained in currency long after the descendants of the stories' protagonists had lost all knowledge of them. I needed to find out why the descendants of Nat Thomas and Betty were no longer there.

The Maveses, Tylers and I all knew from reading his will that when Nat Thomas died in 1879 he left fifty-one acres of freehold land to his grandson, Nathaniel Simpson, the eldest of Hannah and Thomas Simpson's six sons (they also had three daughters).⁹ To find out what then happened to this holding, I sought out land records in Adelaide and on Kangaroo Island.

I learnt that from 1881 Nat Simpson and his brothers increased their holdings so that by 1904, a year after their father died, they owned the lease to almost 12,300 acres. They

were among the top three farming families in the Dudley district.¹⁰

In 1907 Nat Simpson was listed in the *Cyclopaedia of South Australia* alongside other successful South Australian gentlemen. His biography describes him as ‘agriculturist and grazier’ and a Justice of the Peace for the past six years who had served two terms for the Dudley District Council.¹¹ His brothers Thomas and William too had served as district councillors.¹² A photograph in the local museum shows three of the Simpson brothers in suits and boaters as members of the local cricket team. The Simpsons, it seems, were an established, successful farming family.

But in the twenty years after 1910, the Simpsons lost almost all their land. They sold it to other farmers in Dudley. I could not work out why. There had not been a general slump in this period. Indeed, the other substantial landowners in Dudley—six large families who settled in the district between the 1850s and the 1890s—continue to own and farm land today. When they showed me their genealogies, I also found these families were all intricately linked by marriage over five generations. Only the Simpson family is missing from all the genealogies and is no longer farming there today.

When I went to Dudley and asked members of these six colonial families why the Simpsons had lost their land, I was told: ‘They were Aboriginal. They fell out of the social connection and didn’t marry easily.’¹³ In everyday interaction the Simpsons were accepted, but when it came to marriage the racial line was clearly drawn. ‘No one would make a fuss’, I was told, ‘until you start to talk of marrying one.’¹⁴ That was the sticking point, and the source of several personal tragedies. When I spoke to these colonial descendants, the stories unfolded: the Marshal parents who forbade two of their daughters to marry Simpson boys¹⁵ and the Simpson girl who was jilted by her fiancé, the schoolteacher, after locals warned him off.¹⁶ ‘Stay white—keep away from any colour!’, one informant warned me.¹⁷ Another explained that there had been a real fear of the ‘throwback’ in her parents’ time. ‘It was commonly believed ... that any children could come back quite black.’¹⁸ Some of Nat and Betty’s grandchildren married, but to people with small landholdings or no land at all.¹⁹ Also

significant is the timing; by the time the elder Simpson sons might have been able to recruit the support of nephews, they were in their late middle age and thus without the crucial extended family support that the rest of the farming community depended upon.

The Simpsons became swaggies, dependent on their former peers and neighbours to give them seasonal work. 'Old Nat', as an elderly colonial descendant remembered Nat Simpson, was a 'rather pathetic ... poor, haggard old man'. He and his brother William were, she told me, 'sort of bushmen', who occasionally came into town carrying swags. Another descendant said that the whole family 'went to the dogs'.

Their admissions of marital exclusion did not prevent the colonial descendants from claiming that the Simpsons lost their land because of poor management and alcoholism. 'The Abo ... never gave much for land holding', a colonial descendant reflected. They were, according to another descendant, a 'de-tribalised people' for whom it was 'foreign ... alien ... to work on the land'. 'The Simpson family', one colonial descendant told me, 'wasted their inheritance through drinking.' Others agreed. 'They were drinkers', I was told over again. 'That's where their money went', said one informant. Poverty, failure and finally absence have come to define the Thomas descendants' Aboriginality, and contradictorily, to justify their exclusion and land loss.

By the 1960s there were no Thomas descendants living in Dudley. Joan, her mother and her aunt remained on the island, in Kingscote, as did two of Richard's uncles. Most of the Thomas descendants had gone to Adelaide and some to other parts of Australia. When they moved out of the Dudley district, they took the opportunity not to tell their children about their Aboriginal ancestry and indeed very little, if anything, about their history on Kangaroo Island.

The history of the Thomas descendants is one of loss: of loss of land, of dislocation, and loss of history. And even when they began to regain their history from the early 1980s, they were unable to regain a historical memory comparable to that retained by the colonial descendants in Dudley.

—

The six Dudley colonial families (pseudonyms):

Walker
 Niven
 Marshal
 Cornelly
 Barnes
 Richards

For a Dudley colonial descendant a name can ring up a five-generation genealogy as fast as a cash register. Their genealogies collectively encompass the history of the pioneering days and of land settlement, so that family history becomes community history.

The colonial families own almost all the farming land in Dudley, but they are numerically a minority within the present population. Margaret Southlyn, née Niven, explained to me that there are two groups within Dudley, the 'locals' and the 'local locals': those who live in Dudley and those who have 'always' lived in Dudley. Margaret admitted that, for mere locals, the local locals are a difficult group to penetrate.²⁰ Without the history (or the land that contains the history) the locals do not have the language to be able to converse and celebrate the local locals' 'collective memory' in the sense that Maurice Halbwachs has defined it, where the act of remembering is a social phenomenon structured by group identities.²¹

But while the locals are excluded because they have not 'always' lived there, the Thomas descendants are excluded because they have 'always' lived there but did not know it. Their exclusion is essential to the local locals' self-definition. If the Thomas descendants do not register in Margaret Southlyn's binary definition of the Dudley community, it is because their history has been absorbed, or more accurately appropriated. Knowledge of 'the Aboriginal history', of the sealing days and of the descendants of Nat Thomas, is a fundamental part of the colonial descendants' exclusive memory, which is passed on by an oral tradition from generation to generation. Even knowledge of how to set a wallaby snare, a skill brought to the island by the Aboriginal women, is understood as part of colonial 'tradition'.²² In the absence of a 'real' frontier,

that essential ingredient of any pioneering narrative, the pre-settlement islanders have become the Dudley colonial descendants' 'own' prehistory. Even the closeted story of the Simpsons' land loss plays an essential part in defining colonial legitimacy and success.

The ethnologist Roger Bastide argues that collective memory is not merely collective consciousness, analogous to Jung's collective subconscious, but is defined and structured by the group's power relations.²³ The colonial descendants can sustain an identity in part defined by the Thomas descendants' exclusion because their history is rooted in the land that they predominantly own. Even if the land is sold to another colonial descendant, the history remains within the group. The island's Aboriginal history has come into colonial ownership with the transfer of property. To those who know, the creeks, gullies and flats bespeak the people and events of the island's history. And, because those who know are colonial descendants, the places that bespeak pre-colonial history have become symbols appropriate to a narrative of colonial legitimacy and success.

—

On a cold winter's day in 1993 I met Brian Barnes in the house his grandfather built on a steep hill over looking Penneshaw. Brian told me a wealth of names, personalities and incidents that covered the Dudley district dating since his childhood. And, delving back further, he took out the exercise book in which he had recorded the stories his grandfather told him.

Pig's Head Flat

In the pre-1836 days, when Kangaroo Island was inhabited by all sorts of runaway sailors and escaped convicts with their Aboriginal wives, George Bates and Nat Thomas were living at Antechamber Bay. They had heard that a ship was anchored in Nepean Bay ... so it was decided that George would walk to where Kingscote now stands and trade for ... tobacco and nails. George had done his trading and was well on his way home ... when he remembered he had not bought Nat's tobacco. He knew Nat, who could be a bit violent at times,

would be very nasty if he didn't get his tobacco, so he decided to leave the nails under a tree on the flat which he marked with an old pig's skull which he found there. After walking all the way back for the tobacco, he searched ... for the nails and was never able to find them, but the spot from that time on was always called Pig's Head Flat.

The Barnes family has owned the land near Pig's Head Flat for four generations. Brian's grandfather was the land's first owner, and, Brian told me, he had personally known Nat Thomas. The story is also well known by the other colonial descendants, and the council has put up a sign near the flat with the name 'Pig's Head Corner'. The story is part of the colonial descendants' collective memory. It offers them the opportunity to demonstrate their exclusive knowledge through storytelling.

As the land's owner, however, Brian is the story's primary curator, and he considers it particularly his own. Only he can give it validity. Not only has Brian written the story down, using as many of his grandfather's words as he can remember, but he has material evidence to prove the story's authenticity. After reading me the story, he took me to his shed where a couple of rusted hand-made nails were hanging on display. One of them had a paper tag attached stating that these were the nails of pre-colonial settler George Bates. Brian explained that he and his father had been digging a post-strainer hole on the flat when they found a 'mass of rusty iron', in which were preserved 'the remains of George's lost nails'.

Literally earthed in the land, the buried nails of the Pig's Head Flat story ratify the notion that land secretes memory. Finding the nails brought the story back to life. On a broader level, working on land owned for four generations brings the history of the colonial descendants back to life; the reality of work meets the mythology of the past, the mundane blends with the memorial. Pierre Nora talks of history being the death of memory. Where history is critical and reconstructed, memory is spontaneous and unconscious. Working their ancestors' land is for the colonial descendants predominantly an unconscious interaction with the past. In that context they are living, as Nora defines it, 'within memory'. If such an existence were total, then:

Each gesture, down to the most everyday, would be experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning. With the appearance of the trace ... of distance, we are not in the realm of true memory but of history.²⁴

For Brian Barnes, going into his shed is an act of 'true memory', but telling me about it is not. While Brian must go in there daily without thinking about his ancestors, my presence as visiting student historian introduces a distancing 'trace'. Similarly, the colonial descendants must drive past Pig's Head Corner without considering its history, but at one stage they decided to memorialise its story by erecting a signpost. Could it be that, left totally 'alone', without visiting historians, tourists or even 'locals', the colonial descendants would be a 'people of memory', similar to Nora's example of the Jews?²⁵

The question is immaterial. While Pig's Head Flat is contained within colonial descendants' land, it has a pre-colonial history. It is reminiscent of the same 'savage' as Lubra Creek—Nat Thomas. This process of appropriation distances the colonial descendants from their memory. They cannot live totally within memory because their history must not only remain in the past, memorialised by the signpost and by the nails with their paper tags, but must simultaneously reinforce their narrative of continual habitation. They strike a balance between the two by the semi-conscious/unconscious relationship that they sustain with their past through their land. Pig's Head Flat is both a historical site and farming land: it has a non-physical as well as a physical use. This means the colonial descendants are not totally 'within memory', nor are they totally 'within history'. They can consciously maintain the myth of pre-colonial history, but their unconscious maintenance of the land creates the honest belief that that history has become theirs to tell. It is, in essence, a Lockean appropriation of history: the colonial descendants invest the labour, and therefore claim the harvest of 'true memory', even if that memory is based on a history that is not their own.

So the colonial descendants must walk in both worlds: the world of constructed linear history, of signposts and museums, and the world of digging post-strainer holes on their ancestors'

land. As long as they remain on the land, they can justify and sustain that contradiction. If the Barneses were to sell their land and leave the area, ultimately they would have only their history, which, as Nora points out ‘belongs to everyone and no one’; a mere share in a public asset. Memory, on the other hand, Nora explains, ‘is blind to all but the group it binds’.²⁶

The colonial descendants are aware—consciously or not—of the role land plays in sustaining this balance between history and memory. This awareness is demonstrated in the history of the Barnes family produced by Brian Barnes’ niece-in-law, Julie Barnes. Julie endeavoured to write ‘not a history of the people’, but a history of ‘the land the family have farmed since first arriving at Hog Bay’. The people only appear because their lives ‘have been interwoven with the land’. Julie writes:

I hope to make the reader of these pages, particularly my children, appreciate the land. The value is not its financial worth, or the amount of production it is capable of, but the fact that five generations of the same family have survived because of it ... It is the only enduring link we have with our forebears. It gives us a sense of belonging and continuity.²⁷

Thus the land provides history—the ‘enduring link’, the narrative of progress, of pioneering hardships and success—but it also provides memory, the ‘sense of belonging and continuity’. It provides the pre-colonial myth that demonstrates the success of that ‘enduring link’. Therefore, with land as the buffer, the polarities of history and memory can coexist. Memory can indeed ‘crystallise’, as Nora calls it, into history, but it can also exist in a fluid, dynamic form. The buried nails of Pig’s Head Flat are a crystallised memory in so far as they are part of a myth, but their material presence brings the memory to life. As the land is living and growing, so too is the identity of the colonial descendants.

Land, not blood, secretes memory. So little of the Thomas descendants’ history has entered museums, books and archives. So much has entered into the annals of colonial memory in Dudley. Theirs is a history of exclusion exclusively remembered.

'The start of everything'

When James Maves found out that his great-great-grandmother was described as the 'Last Tasmanian', he thought that she 'must have been a princess'. But when he went to look for evidence of his exotic ancestry, he 'couldn't find anything'. His grandmother had told him some stories, but in time they have become mixed up and abstracted:

I still can't recall ... if [my grandmother] was talking about her father or her grandfather; someone who went to the mainland in a boat ... came back and was carrying a keg of nails and must of had a heart attack in the sand dunes.²⁸

Here is the keg of nails from Pig's Head Flat confused with the sudden death of William (Joe) Seymour in the sand dunes of Antechamber Bay. I had been told, as a child, that Joe had been buried where he fell. Fiona Marshal explained to me that on hearing the news, Mary Seymour had merely said: 'Trust the old bugger to die there!'²⁹ James imagined Mary as a 'princess', but the colonial descendants speak of sardonic humour. They know James' ancestors as they know their land. While his history informs their identity, for James discovering his ancestry was:

no different to finding out your great-great-great-grandmother was Welsh or Finnish or whatever else, except to the extent that it does make me feel a little closer to where I live. If I was to find out that she was a North American Indian, I would probably feel closer to Arizona than I do right now.

If James felt abstracted from his past, he said that his mother felt 'less secure'. She had, after all, remained silent about the *Walkabout* article for thirty years. It seemed to me that Joan only really felt secure relating to her ancestry as marking the beginning of Kangaroo Island history. Discovering this interpretation was a turning point for Joan:

We was out on a picnic ... and we met some new people ... and they started to talk about it ... and they said 'Oh,

you're going to be famous ... you've come down from the first child born on Kangaroo Island', and ... I thought; 'Oh, gee, I am somebody', and from then on I went on talking about it, and I wasn't ashamed of it, or it didn't worry me.³⁰

With her newfound confidence, Joan Maves joined the Kangaroo Island Pioneers Association (KIPA), an Adelaide-based organisation established with the aim to gain recognition of Kangaroo Island as South Australia's first settlement. They made Joan their first patron. The honour was reported in the local paper. One local was inspired to create a headstone for Mary Seymour's unmarked grave, which described her as 'the first white girl born on K Is. Daughter of Nat Thomas and Betsy [*sic*], a Tasmanian full blood Aboriginal.'

Remembering Mary as a 'white girl' seemed a positive attempt to welcome Joan into the progressive, celebrated island history. This was something Joan accepted eagerly. 'My ancestor ... was the first child born on Kangaroo Island', Joan told me, 'that's the start of everything, isn't it?'³¹

In 1986, Joan met Richard Tylor, when he too joined the KIPA. With David, they wanted to do more than recognise Kangaroo Island as the state's first settlement, they wanted to assert their ancestors as the first South Australians. 'We go back to the very beginning', Richard told me, 'Nat Thomas was there in 1827 ... [and] Betty ... in about 1819 ... They were some of the earliest ... pioneers on the island.'³²

By 1991, the KIPA had agreed to erect plaques to remember Nat Thomas in Penneshaw and at Antechamber Bay. Two years later, David approached the Division of State Aboriginal Affairs to fund a memorial to honour Betty near her unmarked grave. The inscription remembers Nat and Betty as 'early settlers' who had the 'first documented' child in South Australia, as well as the Aboriginal woman's 'significant contribution to the early development of the island'.

This important memorial brings to public light a history remembered almost exclusively by colonial descendants. But here, at their seemingly most challenging point, the complexity and extent of the Thomas descendants' exclusion is still evident. The words 'first', 'settlers' and 'development' suggest an attempt to squeeze into the right side of the beginning

marker to qualify within linear progress. But the point of one's exclusion can't become the point of one's inclusion. David, Richard and Joan want what Jonathan Boyarin claims is the impossible: for the past to affect the present while reconstructed into a single arrow moving unidirectionally through a disconnected space.³³ This model of history does not, as Paul Carter describes it, offer the opportunity of 'going back'; it treats space as dead.³⁴ To bring space to life is to recognise how it has been reconstructed into *place*.³⁵ But the Thomas descendants cannot see how spaces become places within colonial memory; they have been excluded from such knowledge. As a result their model of time and space is, to use Boyarin's terminology, 'politically ineffective'.³⁶

Historical priority is not a concern for Dudley colonial descendants, so they are not challenged by another's claim for it. Claiming historical primacy is not necessary for 'local locals'. It is the inability to see this marker of exclusion that ensures that the Thomas descendants' legacy of dispossession continues. Their historicisation of their ancestry is therefore an Aboriginal experience of a particular kind.

It is analogous to Sally Morgan's finding out about her Aboriginal ancestry in her adult life, and then writing about her journey to understand it, in her well-known book *My Place*. While her story has been widely celebrated, Bain Attwood finds Morgan's Aboriginality 'inherently problematic'.³⁷ This is not because it is constructed, but because Morgan claims it is essential and spiritual. Attwood also criticises Morgan for trying to reconcile her own life with the experiences of previous generations when there is 'no real dialectic' between them. While they have 'suffered a particular form of oppression ... this does not hold true for Morgan'.

But Attwood's criticism misses the point: it does not acknowledge that the reason Sally Morgan did not know her history was that it was an Aboriginal history. If her family's testimonies represent, as Attwood claims, 'a foreign county which Morgan cannot readily understand', they do explain the historical silence she grew up with.³⁸ Not knowing, and having to construct a narrative in order to understand, was part of her Aboriginal experience.

In 1991, the *Adelaide Advertiser* asked Joan if they could photograph and interview her at Antechamber Bay. Standing near the Hills hoist on the back lawn of the farmer's house, Joan was asked her how she 'felt' to be standing so close to the 'burial site' of her ancestor. 'I felt nothing', Joan told me. 'Nothing.'

But Joan went back to Antechamber Bay several times and over time, could not 'help but feel an affiliation with the land'. Joan's affiliation had to be learned. She did not inherit it along with generations of storytelling.

'Didn't she know she had Aboriginal blood? Oh goodness me!' Mary Niven said to me, before finally reasoning: 'I suppose it never hit her.' Other colonial descendants drew a similar conclusion. So it is that ignorance becomes the measure of acceptance. But Joan sought to be accepted, to continue a longer history in which her family, as she told me, had 'joined in with everything exactly the same as everybody else; there was nothing different about them'.

But at one point in our conversations, Joan mentioned to me something James had uncovered from Aboriginal Protection Board records. As a result of being deemed a 'half-caste' by the Dudley council, Mary Seymour been forced to hand her house over to the Crown in return for basic rations when she was in need. '[Mary] wasn't helped as much as she should have been', Joan insisted. Indeed, Joan remembered her mother and aunt discussing how the Penneshaw store-keeper had ripped Mary off. But Joan would not let me record his name, for fear of upsetting his living Penneshaw relatives.

For Joan to remind the Dudley community of her history of exclusion, or to assert an Aboriginality, would have pushed the limits of acceptance within the colonial-descendant community. One Dudley resident told me that 'anyone less than a half-caste' had 'no right to call themselves an Aborigine'.³⁹ Instead, Joan accepted her history as others had packaged it for her, in the way they had found acceptable and unchallenging. For if Joan did not inherit generations of storytelling, she did inherit her family's silence.

Epilogue

When I visited Kangaroo Island in April 1998, David Tyler,

by then president of the KIPA, invited me around to his cottage for lunch. He had read a draft of this article and at first thought I had ‘missed the point’: ‘I see myself ... as a showman ... being a bit mischievous ... with the history.’ ‘But’, he continued, ‘then I thought, you’ve probably made quite a valid interpretation in many ways.’ I asked if he still thought it was important to ‘squeeze on the right side of the historical marker’. He answered that it ‘doesn’t matter who was here first’.⁴⁰ I laughed. Was this yet another demonstration of his mischievousness?

The next day we went together to Lubra Creek. He was awestruck by the place, by the Aboriginal flint stones, the stories and most of all the sense of peace he felt there.⁴¹

But his political mischievousness was still alive and well. A few days later, when he gave me a lift to Penneshaw, he asked me, as KIPA president, if I would address this year’s annual dinner. ‘Are you sure?’ I asked.

On 27 July 1998 I presented the above story to the members of the KIPA. Several of the other Thomas descendants attended, along with many Dudley colonial family members. I don’t think I have ever been so nervous. At the end of my talk one of the Dudley colonial descendants stood up and in a forthright manner said: ‘My grandmother used to walk up that hill to where [Joan’s mother] used to live and play bridge with them. And they did that in the 1930s!’⁴²

Then Richard stood up. He told everyone how, as a boy, he used to visit his Auntie Annie, Joan Maves’ mother. There he often used to see ‘this dark lady’. He had never known that she was his Auntie Mary, let alone played cards with her.⁴³

Several months before the KIPA dinner I had sent a draft of this article to Richard. In response he wrote, ‘You make a big thing of memory or the loss of memory, but to me it doesn’t mean a thing. All I know is history.’⁴⁴

Richard’s words inspired my title. But when we met again in April 1998 he said the notion of ‘losing memory’ was still not clear. So I asked him what he knew of the land at Antechamber Bay and when he said he knew little more than where the plaque was erected in front of Nat’s house, I told him that this is what I meant by having lost memory. He said:

If they had been accepted, then ... it would have been like the colonial [descendants] ... they talk about their ancestors ... well, had they been accepted they may have talked about their ancestors too.⁴⁵

I redrafted this essay in September 1998 and emailed it to David Tyler. The next day he responded that for a while now he and his father had thought about ‘proclaim[ing]’ their Aboriginal ‘heritage’. But he said that in the current climate of ‘overt racism’ people might look at their ‘apparent’ whiteness and assume they were trying to claim benefits. He told me there were KIPA members disturbed by my talk and that he had tried to explain to them the differences between overt and covert racism, and that the latter had caused his family’s exclusion. Finally he told me, ‘you have to say [this story] is important and [that] it must be told. The same story must exist across Australia ... but for those [who are] the subject of the story it can be difficult to do the telling. It must come from the outside.’⁴⁶

—

‘What is the unconscious (or conscious) problem that belief in her Aboriginality solves for Morgan’, asks Attwood, ‘or what wishes or desires does this belief satisfy?’⁴⁷ Assuming it is as simple as ‘wishes and desires’ Attwood thus discounts Sally Morgan’s Aboriginality.

But when Sally Morgan and Richard and David Tyler discovered their Aboriginal ancestry it was not as simple as Attwood assumes. Not knowing their history was in fact their inheritance — the result of a history of Aboriginal exclusion. Their resulting ‘constructions’ cannot be abstracted from this legacy. David’s words that, ‘it has to come from the outside’ is an acknowledgement of how much is lost, so much that its hard to begin how to tell the narrative of how it came to be that way.

But David, standing under the melaleucas at Lubra Creek crossing taught me that a sense of loss could not alone define his Aboriginality; it is not sustainable. David needed to find that same ‘sense of belonging’ that Julie Barnes, a white

colonial descendant, claims she has. David's ancestors' land is also being used to form his identity, but, unlike Julie, he had to learn where it was. Unlike Julie, David's sense of loss is incorporated into his sense of belonging.

Reflection

It is an honour to be asked to republish older work, especially as this was my first publication. I was proud and excited in 1999 by the opportunity to feature in a refereed journal, especially as Stephen Muecke and Meaghan Morris had asked me to write it. Their interest in my work was an important validation of my attempt to write a local history and of, as it seemed to me at the time, my bold and forthright theoretical approach to understanding the identities constructed by those for whom an Aboriginal ancestry was a revelatory discovery.

My research for this article included carrying out interviews on Kangaroo Island and Adelaide in 1993 and 1994. This was not long after Bain Attwood's critique of Sally Morgan's *My Place* appeared, the controversial nature of which inspired several responses including this one. I argued that the very act of having to 'construct' an identity—of having to come to terms with the loss of memory caused by a family's silence and shame—was a particular Aboriginal experience. While I remained faithful to this idea, the final paragraphs of this paper are testimony to what I had begun to reconsider: that 'loss alone cannot define Aboriginality'.

By the time this article was reworked in the book *Unearthed* in 2002 I concluded: 'Memory lost, a history unearthed. In the freshly turned earth, new memories are seeded. And the roots grow deep.'⁴⁸ By then I believed it was possible to forge new, valid, Aboriginal identities where there had been only silence. Since *Unearthed*, I learned that the Aboriginal community in Tasmania have never forgotten the women and their descendants who lived on Kangaroo Island. If this history had been silenced by a generation of descendants from Kangaroo Island, it is important to acknowledge that their history remained a living part of a wider Tasmanian Aboriginal memory.

Lastly, this article now includes two considerable changes. Since all but one of the families who appear here were happy to have their real names used in the 2008 edition of *Unearthed*, then it seems logical to use them here rather than the pseudonyms I

used in 1999. Secondly, the 1999 article was nearly twice as long as this version. The section ‘The start of everything’ is a new heading, under which several sections have been reduced. This editing has been done with an effort to retain the essential information and ideas.

This article was later reworked and appears in *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island* published by Wakefield Press. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help Jenny Lee, Tom Griffiths and Ann Curthoys gave me in preparing this article, and the help Patrick Wolfe gave me when it was part of my MA thesis. I would also like to thank the South Australian Ministry of Arts whose funding for my book also helped me to write this article.

Notes

- 1 Ernestine Hill, ‘Last of the Tasmanians’, *Walkabout*, 1 July 1954, p. 20.
- 2 Thomas Dunabin, ‘The Old Sealing Days’ in *The Australian Junior Encyclopaedia*, Charles Barrett (ed.), 3 vols, The Australian Educational Foundation, Sydney, 1959, vol. 1, pp. 304-6.
- 3 Letter from Edward Barnes [pseudonym], *Chronicle*, 22 September 1960.
- 4 J. S. Cumpston, *Kangaroo Island, 1800-1836*, Roebuck Society Publication, Canberra, 1970, p. v.
- 5 Philip A. Clarke, ‘Early European Interaction with Aboriginal Hunters and Gatherers on Kangaroo Island, South Australia’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 20, 1996, pp. 51-81.
- 6 The Dudley District, also the Hundred of Dudley, incorporates Antechamber Bay and Penneshaw within its boundaries. The Hundred of Dudley is a peninsula attached to the western end of Kangaroo Island by a narrow neck of land.
- 7 Clarke also lists several other stories of Aboriginal women escaping from Kangaroo Island by swimming in ‘The Aboriginal Presence on Kangaroo Island, South Australia’ in Jane Simpson and Luise Hercus (eds), ‘Histories in Portraits: Biographies of Nineteenth Century South Australian Aboriginal People’, special edition of *Aboriginal History*, Monograph 6, Southwood Press, Sydney, 1998, pp. 24-8.
- 8 Jean Nunn, *This Southern Land: A Social History of Kangaroo Island 1800-1890*, Investigator Press, Adelaide, 1989, p. 57.
- 9 Nathaniel Walles Thomas’ Last Will and Testament, 29 July 1879, Penneshaw Folk Museum, Kangaroo Island.
- 10 Assessment Records of the District of Dudley, Dudley Council Chambers, Kangaroo Island, 1888-1889.
- 11 H.T. Burgess (ed.), *The Cyclopaedia of South Australia*, Cyclopaedia Company, Adelaide, 1907-09, 2 vols, vol. II, p. 1021.
- 12 Minutes of the Dudley Council, Dudley Council Chambers, Kangaroo Island, 1889-1902.
- 13 Personal interview with Brian Barnes, Penneshaw, 28 June 1993.
- 14 Brian Barnes, 1993.
- 15 Personal interview with Agnes Marshal, Penneshaw, 27 August 1994.
- 16 Personal interview with Agnes Walker, near Kingscote, 4 September 1994.

- 17 Personal interview with John Niven, Penneshaw, 26 August 1994.
 18 Agnes Marshal, 27 August 1994.
 19 The one exception was a fourth-generation Thomas descendant who had become a deep-sea captain. His position was seen as an anomaly for his Aboriginal ancestry. But the fact he had 'worked himself up', as his position was described (and the fact he and his wife lived in Port Adelaide) made the marriage somehow more acceptable.
 20 Personal interview with Keith and Margaret Southlyn, Antechamber Bay, 2 September 1994.
 21 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. F.J. Ditter and V.Y. Ditter, Harper and Row, New York, 1980. In the introduction, Ditter and Ditter discuss the 'impassable barrier' between people who do not share enough of the same collective memories, pp. 21-5. See also Paula Hamilton, 'The Knife Edge; Debates About History and Memory' in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 19.
 22 Brian Barnes, 1993.
 23 Hamilton, pp. 19-20.
 24 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, vol. 26, 1989, p. 8.
 25 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 26 Here Nora is quoting Halbwachs' notion (p. 22) that there are as many memories as there are groups.
 27 Julie Barnes [pseudonym], History of the [Barnes] Family (in the possession of Julie Barnes: unpublished, c. 1990), p. 1.
 28 Personal interview with James Maves, Reynella, South Australia, 19 June 1993.
 29 Personal interview with Robin and Fiona Marshal, Antechamber Bay, 27 June 1993.
 30 Personal interview with Joan Maves, Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, 26 June 1993.
 31 Joan Maves, 2 September 1994. Further references to this interview will be given after quotations in the text.
 32 Richard and David Tyler, Adelaide, 15 August 1994.
 33 Jonathan Boyarin, 'Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory' in Jonathan Boyarin (ed.), *Remapping Memory and the Politics of TimeSpace*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 2.
 34 Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, p. 294.
 35 Carter discusses how space becomes place through the process of naming, pp. xiii-xxv.
 36 Boyarin claims that when we talk of the 'politics of memory' we are 'really referring to rhetoric about the past mobilized for political purposes'. It is from this premise he argues that if the past is politically effective in the present, than the model of timespace must be complicated to accommodate this assumption [my italics], Boyarin, p. 2.
 37 Bain Attwood, 'Portrait of an Aboriginal as an Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 99, 1992, p. 303. Directly relevant responses to Attwood by Jackie Huggins, Tony Birch, Isabel Tarrago and Tim Rowse were printed in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 100, 1993.
 38 Attwood, pp. 303-6, 313-4.
 39 Personal conversation with the curator of the Penneshaw Folk Museum.
 40 Personal interview with David Tyler, Kingscote, Kangaroo Island, 13 April 1998.
 41 Audio recording of the trip from Kingscote to Antechamber Bay with David Tyler and others, 14 April 1998.

HISTORY, POWER, TEXT

- 42 Audio and visual recordings of my address to the KIPA annual dinner, Adelaide, 17 July 1998.
- 43 My address to the KIPA dinner, 1998.
- 44 Letter from Richard Tyler of Hawthorn, Adelaide, 14 January 1998.
- 45 Richard Tyler, 18 April 1998.
- 46 Email from David Tyler, 29 September 1998.
- 47 Attwood, p. 303.
- 48 Rebe Taylor, *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2002, p. 5.