

# BASALT

*Ross Gibson*

LOST ROCKS

BASALT

Ross Gibson

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1  
Lava flowing

I

The town of Camperdown lies in a  
lull of land  
 that is not quite a hollow.

Two hours drive west from Melbourne, the car  
 spends  
 fifteen minutes of  
 odd exertion

crossing blustery plains

until a hillock gives the road a gear-changing

climb

and you ease over a crest,

down

to leeward calm

where speed-caution signs mark the civic  
 boundaries.

Tidy houses and shops cluster around municipal  
 bastions that are built staunch in the local

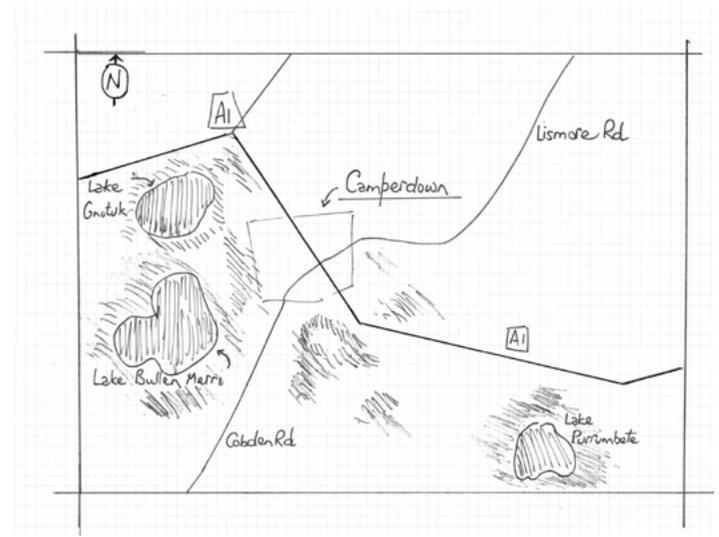
bluestone. The townsfolk are snug from the winds because the streets are cupped all around by rocky knolls and washaway pits. Life is cosier here than on the buffeting tract over in the east.

The world seems to settle, to ease still and rest solid.

Then as you travel northwesterly out the far side of town, there is a verge on another crest banking left

in a windward arc around

the volcanic crater-rim of neighbouring Lake Gnotuk.



The hills puckering here are part of a larger warp-and-weft that kneads westerly out into gale-driven country.

So the car lolls and rouses henceforth as it negotiates

the plain

rising

falling

rising

falling

rising

every five hundred metres

like a boat

cruising

the waves

of an agitated ocean.

This is the start of the district that is

extensive green

but

dappled

with

scattered chunks of black & grey –

the district known as

the Stony Rises

known as

the Stony Rises

known as

the Stony Rises.

In the Stony Rises the roads wobble loosely up and

over wide-set terrestrial

wave-peaks,

wave-peaks

that were formed eons ago by

surface-swelling perturbations

during volcanic seasons when all this plain was a

torrid smear of lava popping magma bubbles into

curved ridges and circular craters  
that became lakes when the earth eased  
and cooled slowly into something  
SOLID.

The lava that gives shape and memory to the Stony  
Rises: it is basalt.

The main laval activity, causing the country to  
materialise from torrid magma fluid, occurred  
ages ago. Estimators use 'one hundred millennia'  
for the plus-or-minus margins when making the  
guesses.

The last major eruption, though, was recent: a  
splattered explosion breached the thin basalt crust  
to create Budj Bim.

('Budj Bim' is an indigenous expression meaning  
'High Head'. In settler-English, it is called  
'Mt Eccles'.)

The explosion emitted the great ooze that is  
known today as

the Tyrendarra Flow.

A new draft of lava was thus dispensed across  
wavy basalt top-crust, like hot toffee drizzled on a  
recently-baked tart.

Carbon-dating suggests the Tyrendarra Flow  
occurred between 25,000 and 30,000 years  
ago. So the Budj Bim eruption would have been  
witnessed by local Aborigines. Those who were not  
destroyed in the fallout would have retreated to  
cooler ground and cleaner air until eventually they  
could flow back into the homeland after the ash  
and dust had become vegetal soil and the lava had  
hardened into extra basalt rises and ramparts.

(This process of retreat and return has endured.  
The peoples' generationally-trained and fabled  
ability to flow back-and-forth through the laval  
ribbing of the stone-pocked country informed the  
tactics of the indigenous warriors in the late 1840s,

during the conflicts now known as the Eumeralla Wars, when the incoming colonists – horse-mounted and wagon-dragging – discovered how much unlike a pre-destined paradise the green country could be).

Minor volcanic uprisings have been occurring ever since Budj Bim was created. The spitting magma engendered Lake Condah eight thousand years ago. And geologists admit the turbulence might not yet be finished. Maybe, in the coming thousand years, somewhere else in the basalt skin will explode.

At the outskirts of Camperdown, you can scale any ridge to see how the roads in and out of town are a *record*. The roads are materialized, three-dimensional prints of the country's past liveliness. The roads are massy memories of hot fluid flowing and wobbling, cooling and solidifying. They flex in contact with deep time. They *remember* deep time. The past is right there on the ruffled ground, highlighted by the sheened tarmac ribbons that render it all the more visible in the troughy

topography of the Stony Rises.

In the mind's eye, see the lava oozing.

See the country holding its original fluidity in its present-day topography.

Undulation defines the Stony Rises.

(“Undulation”: one restless fluid inquires of another.)

The land-surface undulates. The sky-weather pulsates. Minute by minute, the wind and rain thrum, prompting the wild light into a slow-throbbing display as the sun's glare flares and bastes enormous bruised clouds tumbling stratospheric above glistening crater lakes.

The temperature rises and falls.

So does the humidity.

And before long, with a slower diurnal beat that draws the night-time in, spattered starlight shimmers awhile in an obsidian vault until sunlight returns and rolls the elements around in dawn yet again.

Here is a liquid country, jostled by commingled rhythms that beat in milliseconds, in minutes, in months, in millennia all fibrillating within it at any one moment.

Unsettling, self-disquieting: this undulating country.

See the other kinds of cycles in the basalt Rises, not just the natural ones. See how, in the *cultural* pulses that animate the business of men and women every day, wealth is something that has flowed here too, *wealth* first generated long ago for the sustenance of a myriad Indigenous generations in the time before settlement, and wealth in the form of mercantile currency flushing through the trade-economies

of colonial times, carrying fortunes from the farmlands to Melbourne and out to the larger, northern-hemisphere world.

The colonial trade exploited natural resources. Extracted from nature and constructed into culture, the basaltic bluestone was a solid symbol of colonialism succeeding. Outcrops of basalt were quarried so that great slabs of dark masonry could be trucked to building sites where colonial stature was marked and raised monumentally high. Out in the pastoral country, the bluestone was shaped into the grand Western District farm mansions. Back in Melbourne, where much of it was hewn out of Clifton Hill, the bluestone made the Government edifices – the banks, prisons and ministerial headquarters. On the southwestern plains, building-blocks of bluestone were taken from upthrusting basalt spurs all through the Stony Rises as well as out further west and up in the north country. Cut, transported and stacked in enormous quantities, the volcanic stone was thus made mobile again, getting hauled and vaulted all across Victoria. Less explosively than in volcanic times, but with comparable impact, the bluestone has thus flowed and piled up again, remaking the

surface of the country yet one more time.

Ebbing and flowing,

churning and channeling:

these Stony Rises.

*Stony*

because of all the broken nubs of volcanic scree that are strewn across the slumping basaltic bedrock that lies blackened under the vegetation thriving on the fecund, volcanic plain-soil that was formed from dust and ash.

The nubs of baked stone, they range in scale from the head of a wallaby to the body of a buck kangaroo. (There are plenty the size of cars and ocean liners too, but they are boulders and ledges, not workable stones.)

Stony,  
these basalt nubs, but not  
stone-dead.  
Not static.  
Not stone-still.

The stones have been assembled across the plains to ensure that the country persists lively, active, unresting but directed. The basalt has been provided by nature and altered in culture to behave here in a strange and special way. Not typically rocklike. More fluid than staunch.

Because of the doubled-up way the grey-black stones work naturally whilst also being put to work culturally, the country keeps moving. The country flows because the basalt guides its currents of energy. The stones give some flux to the winds, to the waters, the vegetation, the animals, to the weather's heatbleed.

To explain in closer detail: examine how the basalt has been arranged to work with the eels.

# 2

## Eels circulating

Short-finned eels flow through basalt-bedded  
channels into, across and out  
from stacked-stone labyrinths and artificial  
catchment pools at Lake Condah in the south-  
western reaches of the Rises.

The eels are part of a pulsed pattern always visiting  
the country,  
always driven naturally  
and  
governed culturally  
throughout the Rises.

The strewn basalt stones  
are instrumental in this driving, in this governing.

The strewn basalt stones  
are both nature and culture.

Thus:

Across the coastal floodplains that fan out  
from Warrnambool, prodigious throngs of  
eels travel in a breeding cycle that distributes  
them in enormous migratory arcs through  
salt and fresh water,

from spawning grounds off New Guinea  
in the Coral Sea, down past the Barrier Reef  
and the Eastern Australia Seaboard,  
round to the chilly southern ocean,  
into the Victorian river systems

and sometimes they go slithering across dewy  
dryland at night time

before

they dally in the freshwater channels of  
the scoured basalt plains preparatory to  
swimming back out into the ocean to press  
north again  
three thousand kilometres,  
now contrary to how they first ventured,  
home to the tropics.

In these flushed coastal lowlands, countless  
generations ago, the Gunditjmara people  
savoured the eels and wanted them all the  
time. So they studied the coming and going  
of the fish, attuned to the cycling of the rainy  
season, and they watched the upwelling and  
draining of the climatic waters within the  
geomorphic subsidences and sluices of the  
basaltic floodplains.

The Gunditjmara began to modify the  
existing veined lavascape by constructing  
their own edifices of piled stone that  
combined artfully with the water-scoured  
run-off channels that nature had provided.

Thus the people laid millions upon millions of  
stones in kilometres after kilometres of laboriously  
furling causeways and weirs. Nature was rendered  
cultural, culture received some raw natural heft.  
Many millions of times, stones were lifted by hand  
and carried from natural resting place to selected  
damming place. Every one of these moves was a

designed act of will: basalt fragments were shifted from the random ground and placed into schemata that were soaked with yearning and intention.

*Stone lifted by hand, Stone lifted by hand,*

*millions of Stones millions of Stones millions of Stones  
millions of Stones millions of Stones millions of Stones  
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*generation after generation after generation after generation  
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after generation after generation after generation after*

*Designing, debating, refining, building, maintaining, expanding,  
designing, debating, refining, building, maintaining, designing,  
debating, refining, building, maintaining, designing, debating,  
refining, building, maintaining, designing, debating, refining,  
building, maintaining, designing, debating, refining, building.*

During so many contiguous centuries of land management and dam-building, the indigenous people have also carried and laid the basalt to construct circular houses and worksheds which were walled up to two metres high and roofed with bark and timber.

The indigenous people have been homesteaders therefore, more than they have been nomads. For, why would they wander far from this heavily-invested infrastructure, from this rock-solid revenue, this hedge against hunger, exposure and uncertainty?

The indigenous people drenched their great project with such volumes of labour that the stone-flows and the dry-walled houses became an intergenerational cultural enterprise.

Why not compare this enterprise to the Pyramids?

The stone-flows and houses served to define the people as great engineers.

The stone-flows are the monumental cultural triumph of the Gunditjmara. The cultural triumph of these flexing, resilient, fluid stone people.

Across centuries of design-development, innovation, labour and re-fashioning, the people of the eel country have produced and maintained immense networks of cairned dams, docks, locks and weirs all integrated to guide the divagating fish across the Lake Condah floodplain toward processing zones.

Consider the great labours of these unstinting eel people: eels, stones, winds, waters and people all giving shape to one another, all making and marking the time of one another in this country that is so flush with so many kinds of currency.

Stone upon stone, with step after step stitched into the country, the people have worked on their homeland, and they have worked it into themselves

thereby, making for themselves an ancestral identity and a continuing livelihood tacked to these tracts that have been tended so assiduously.

With each countless placement and replacement of stone,

iteration after iteration,

stoop after stoop,

stone stacked upon stones,

season after season,

the people have made for themselves an abiding memory shared with the basaltic matter.

The Gunditjmara have made a country that holds the memory of their living labour lodged in the available elements. Culture and nature have produced together a record of successful living, a system of sluices that tap the impetus of the universe and lie out there in the land, still, as a legacy for the unborn, a communally maintained machine of providence made with stone to produce fleshy harvests, year-in year-out, to match the perennial return of the seasons.

So the basalt has almost no stillness about it, not when the activeness of the stones is observed across a full, deep expanse of natural-and-cultural time.

The basalt affords movement, guides fluidity, and rouses action in the animal and vegetable and mineral domains of the Stony Rises. Born oozing as lava, the basalt has never stopped moving in the Rises. The people have picked and carried the stones from one place to another. Gravity, wind, tremors and animals have pushed against these placements while the stones have cajoled the waters, chuted the eels and fluted the winds and whirling weather-eddies to stimulate the people also into patterned returning motion across the plains and across generations of living and making.

Moreover, with each stone that has been picked, lugged and laid down, cultural history has been built as memories and meanings have been set down in the country, attached to the stones, in the peoples' process of working and accounting for all the effort. Stories, songs and ceremonies have



younger fish

could be waylaid from returning to the breeding  
journey, so that they would be

kept

inland

and

fattened

for use after the untrammelled majority of the  
visiting fish had returned to the sea.

This is strikingly like aquaculture, more than just  
opportunistic-capture. The stoneworks are clearly  
a marvelous engineering system perfected centuries  
before the industrial revolution made possible the  
infrastructure of modern logistical fishing. Proto-  
modern not pre-modern, these engineers of the  
basalt-lands.

Nearby the handmade water-corrals, you can still  
visit, touch and *smell* capacious

hollowed-out  
tree trunks,  
centuries old  
and still erect,  
sizable enough  
for an adult  
to stand upright  
inside,

where the eels were

hung,  
smoked,  
dried  
and  
stored

as sustenance for the coming year.

These great sinuous dried morsels

swam

suspended,  
 dead  
     but still lively,  
 nourishing  
     and  
 trade-valuable,  
 adrift  
     in the breezes  
 swirling

out of the curlicued basalt edifices that led and  
 waylaid the eels to their capture.

Across centuries beyond memory, the managed  
 currency within the basalt plains has been  
 prodigious.

Imagining the eel harvest and the systems of songs  
 and stories and ceremonies associated with such  
 a great  
     influx,  
 you might envisage the full social intricacy of the  
 flowing  
     rhythmic

replenishment  
 that surges in the stony country. And you might  
 get an inkling of how the natural world and the  
 cultural world can give  
     shape and momentum to  
     each other  
 when the environment and the inhabitants  
     insinuate and collaborate  
 to sustain continuous vitality moving through a  
 place kept lively over vast time.

You might glimpse how, in the Rises, an unstinting  
 rhythm of recursive work  
     stone upon stone,  
     many hundreds of tonnes,  
 ensures that the future keeps unfurling through the  
 present out of the past.

*Stone upon Stone Stone upon Stone Stone upon Stone Stone upon  
 Stone Stone upon Stone Stone upon Stone Stone upon Stone Stone  
 upon Stone Stone upon Stone Stone upon Stone Stone upon Stone*

The ramparts and junction-valves were  
 stacked

and  
 maintained  
 and  
 repaired  
 and  
 re-stacked

as the seasons and all their motive forces rolled  
 ceaselessly around.

A life-force was thus cajoled, pushing with the  
 water through the welcoming stone sluices.

So the basalt in the Rises has become a sustained  
 and sustaining event-element, as cultural as it is  
 natural.

Because it requires repeated human action  
 obedient to design-principles that have been

researched, refined and passed on

across generations,

the stonework involves memorial practices,  
 practices of stony statement and reiteration  
 stony statement and reiteration  
 stony statement and reiteration  
 in every recursive moment of the aqua-cultural  
 labour.

In every moment of

stooping, of lifting, of passing, of balancing  
 and bolstering,

knowledge has been conveyed from stacker to  
 stacker. And that knowledge stands there in the  
 remaining structures today,

balanced and inter-intricated,  
 impacted by all the reiterated effort,  
 stone depending upon stone.

In its teetering entirety the walled knowledge is  
 simultaneously robust and collapsible all across the  
 Rises.

The knowledge in and of the stonework has been put together as lessons and stories uttered while the walls are

designed, constructed and maintained  
 from generation to generation,  
 designed, constructed and maintained  
 as memorial fabrication accompanying  
 all the labour,  
 memorial fabrication as much as they are  
 fabrication,  
 designed, constructed and maintained  
 as technique-trained action and repetition,  
 repetition  
 all seeping into a cherished, work-seasoned place,  
 making a sustained and sustaining cultural place  
 from the raw elements that were first given by  
 natural space.  
 Thus the stonework is a record of fabrication  
 and fabrication.

(RECORD: a word drawn from the Latin for 'heart', as in 'coeur', 'courage' and 'corazon'.)

(TO RECORD: to bring something back to and through the heart, to put out and bring back a pulse of vitality, a mark made by past exertion, a flush in-and-out that connects the past through the present to the next, future moment.)

The eel-traps and stone-houses in the Rises are a record of the unflinching pulse of Gunditjmara creativity driving labour leading to prosperity, generation after generation.

Basalt flowing.

Basalt flowing to make channels that pulse vitality through nature and culture.

Basalt arteries. Basalt systems of circulation.  
 Not something static or inert.

After centuries of uninterrupted application,  
all this memory-stonework in the Rises saturates  
deep time with the urgency of lessons recorded  
for instructing survival, saturates deep time  
with the relish of design-recipes that concoct  
a flourishing and flushing life-force propelled in  
nutrient circulation.

# 3

## Surplus swelling

This much we have learned: pulses get channeled by massive basalt valves and arteries in the Rises so that vivacity flows in stony systems of circulation in the watery portions of the plains.

Think of the basalt as part of some geological bloodstream.

Think of the basalt as the vital part of a blood-system guaranteeing that the ground can go on abiding *undead*.

This notion of undeadness, it comes from Eric Santner.<sup>1</sup>

In his meditations on the resuscitation of Europe after World War II, Santner describes a drive-to-coherence that he dubs *creaturely*, a drive-to-coherence that courses through any worldly system, be it psychological, social, physical or biological, that has not succumbed to inertness.

This creaturely force ‘constrains’ and ‘excites’ all the elements of its system. And more than natural, it is cultural insofar as participants in the system can exert influence on the force to help it burgeon, to keep it flowing and returning to the nodes and moments within the system where the force brings best benefit. Thus all the elements – animal, vegetable, mineral – can be kept undead even though they tend to decay. Thus the system behaves like a creature, like something with abiding *creativity* active in it, not like the dead object that poor governance or poor bloodflow might doom it to become.

(We could pause and savour here the resonance with Martin Luther King’s axiom: “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice”.<sup>2</sup> Let the goodness in the world be nurtured creaturely all the way through from the physical ground to the metaphysical realm.)

The good governance in the Rises, with its creaturely bloodflow: it generates what Santner calls *surplus animation*.

Surplus animation is an active kind of worldly memory, something continuous, purposefully made by people as time passes, something which people install in places while the present is unfolding so that well-advised principles can be retrieved from the past and pointed forward to be activated when needed in the future.

Surplus animation arcs to guide the world’s next actions, again and again, guaranteeing survival so long as rituals for undeadness are actively nurtured by the inheritors of past fecundity.

Indeed, surplus animation lets the world *flourish*, not merely survive.

Plainly, such a force courses through the eel country, through the material constructs of the stone traps and through the ritualized practices of curating the stones and of hunting and cooking the eels that flow amongst the basalt channels. Surplus animation courses also through the ceremonies and narratives that have been performed annually

across many centuries so that, with each newly adapted reiteration of stonework and ritual, the descendants of the eel people still partake of the carefully marshaled undeadness even as they live, work and die for its continuation.

This is to say that memories concerning the eels are more than old heritage, more than vestigial, even in the aftermath of ecological calamities brought by colonialism, even at this time when the eel-peoples' great engineering work-parties, so long traditionally deployed, cannot presently be convened to work on the full extent of the stone traps. Nevertheless, the eel memories are still being born and reborn, to a real extent, every time someone discusses or visits and takes care of the basalt guide-channels and collection-pools. The surplus animation in the country and in all its interdependent beings still abides as a practical, deliberately husbanded activeness. It still prevails as a continuously restorative process of willful remembering made from the explication of stored-up understanding, made from the ceremonial exertions of stone-hauling and stone-stacking that are still occurring in small work-parties today, made from the partnership with

the country's definitive grey-black stones allied both to dedicated people and to the flowing waters and fish.

Undeadness: mysterious perhaps, but no mystical animus.

Undeadness: something worldly and practical, something made by active, everyday work. Something made from and making surplus animation.

Something cannily commandeering the flowing energy that is even now poised, so long after the eruptions, inside the basalt.

Something that does not lie still.

Undeadness: a force in the basalt that is part of a rhythm that has been measured and maintained and marked across centuries.

# 4

## Unborn upwelling

To recap:

In the Stony Rises a surplus animation flows through and from vast systems of ancient basalt guide-channels and collection-pools that have been constructed and curated by the Guditjmara people.

In the Stony Rises, 'nature and culture have at least this much in common: both compel the living to serve the interests of the unborn.' <sup>3</sup>

In the Stony Rises, 'the unborn' are not only the people but also the eels and every other undead thing that depends both upon the reliable return of the seasons and upon the knowledgeable curation of the flowing energy in the winds and waters.

Everything undead is indebted to the past, so long as remembrance can pay forward the value of whatever liveliness has gone before; so long as the people of the present can carry the knowledge about what has already been harvested by past sojourners, so long as 'the dead, through the care

of the living, perpetuate their afterlives and promote the interests of the unborn'.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore it is no dead thing, the mass of fragmented basalt that has been assembled and curated in the eel-traps. Active beings, these congregations of stones, they push out from the past to bring nourishment and a sense of momentum flowing across the country through to the cusp of the future.

With continuous, custodial work – *memory-work* pushing knowledge through time into and across the plains – undeadness can thrive so the interests of the unborn might be well served and this service of progeny might abide as something memorial lodged in the bodies of the people who do the work, who shift and stack and re-shift and re-stack the stone.

Also this memory-work lives in places, in landscapes, in minerals too, and in physical forces such as wind patterns, seasonal cycles, tides and moon-phased inundations that all get harmonised

by the stonework to comprise an energetic, fluid system of surplus animation. All this potential for storage and retrieval of old knowledge is effectively a massed masonry as memory working together. It is a system of enchantment that has been maintained by highly trained technicians who have long been finessing the immense, memorial technology that ancestors made from the country centuries in the past.

If you balk at calling the Stony Rises *enchanted*, if you are loth to consider these basalt plains as *memory made material*, recall how this liquid landscape has been built purposefully over centuries so that it is subject to persistent, integrating forces that never stop carrying an organised, biotic rhythm from life through death and farther along to the next generations who are yet to be born in the ecosystem of the lava-plains. And recall that human work – human *memory-work* in the ceremonial, incantatory maintenance of the eel-traps and smoking-trees, in the songs, dances, tales and fishing-trips – has ensured that a patterned set of time-worn tendencies continues to give coherence to an eco-system that is always replenishing against depletion while pulsing, season by season, through the Stony Rises.

With all the repeated and ritualized human actions organised around the maintenance of the stones, a vivacious sense of structure, significance and human-centered systematics has been chanted into the country. Each instance of repetitive picking, hauling and placing distills, stores and propels the country's past and future vivacity from person to person from moment to moment. Hence, the country has become effectively enchanted, worksung, ceremonially organised. The country has grown lively out of its remembered, culturally tended past. Vitality has come to rule over morbidity.

As the Gunditjmarra keep working in the service of their country, undeadness continues to press through curated matter and through systematic memory in the Rises to involve animal, vegetable and mineral components in the continuing, cohering pulses of the landscape.

(As Linnaeus famously proclaimed: minerals, vegetables, animals – they all want to grow, when conditions are made right.)

Human beings are just one set of animals here, just one of the myriad undead elements remembering here. Indeed an hierarchical account of all life here most often has the eels as the sovereign element. And close behind the eels, usually, are the millions of lively stacked stones comprising not only the traps and dams and herding-channels but also the dry-stone walls that mark out the farmlands across hundreds of kilometres around the *agricultural* allotments of the Rises.

But a hierarchy is the wrong mode for comprehending such a systematic natural-cultural construct.

Really, every memory-soaked element in this lively landscape (human beings included but not prioritised above all else) is best understood

as a component cohering in a larger kind of remembering-organism answering to the Aboriginal-English name 'country'.

# 5

## Stonestacking continuing

In the Stony Rises the arrival of Europeans two centuries ago damaged the indigenous societies that have been in and of this country since the cessation of the volcanic activity. Among other calamitous activities, the colonists destroyed much of the memory systems of the first people. The colonists broke up the clan networks, moved people from their lands and ranged across the country with animals that changed the qualities of the soil and dismantled many of the built forms in the landscape. The newcomers did this while overlaying the incumbent culture with new patterns of ceremony and memory.

Paradoxically though, some of the new patterns were strikingly like the old patterns. For, just as the Gunditjmarra have done, the colonists set about lifting and carrying stones and setting them in structures that marked and channeled huge swathes of the country. It was as if the country, so distinctively served by the basalt, gave the newcomers no other option. Stone system was set upon stone system, therefore, as the basalt continued to rouse human action, continued flowing into engineered shapes, continued to take the form of a governing, flow-directing culture.

The newcomers hailed from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall. All these places have cherished dry-stone walling for centuries. When the colonists saw the basalt stones in the Rises, they knew exactly what kinds of walls they could build and how to go about making them.

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There is no evidence in the written records to suggest that the newcomers paid close attention to the Gunditjmara's eel ramparts and to their solid ovoid houses with entry-portals set cannily on the lee-side of the roaring westerly winds.

What a chance it was that went missing: to have, say, teams of Cornish wallers workshopping their trade with Gunditjmara hut-builders and channel-engineers! Sad to say, there is no record of such an exchange.

Doubtless the Gunditjmara – great engineers that they were – would have been fascinated to observe the newcomers' logistics. But horrified too. For the new walls were segmenting the country rather than assisting its flows.

There are no records of how the Gunditjmara organised their workflow during the times before the interlopers arrived, but we know about the techniques of the European wallers.

Typically the Europeans worked in pairs or in small teams, having developed a highly efficient method that had patchworked much of the British Isles during the early decades of the Enclosure Process in the late Eighteenth Century, when lands ever-before held in common were seized by neophyte

landholders taking advantage of new modes of national-scale government which favoured the transformation of the country into the objective property set aside for a powerful few. This was the making of hierarchised landscape with a human being as Sovereign.

Of course this same process happened to Gunditjmara country during the Nineteenth Century. As the newcomers' walls took shape along hundreds of kilometres of cadastral property margins, sunburned young apprentices lugged stones over to master-assemblers who stacked every massy building block in such a way that the walls flowed along the lineaments of the country and caused sheep and horses and other wandering entities (human beings included) to alter their accustomed modes of ranging across the Rises.

The European wallers were diligent and inventive too. For example, close by the Eumeralla River south of the Lake Condah eel runs, they made the Bessiebelle Sheepwashes. After the Eumeralla Wars

had subsided in the wake of a forceful military investment from the incoming pastoral economy, remaining tribespeople were eventually sequestered into the Lake Condah Mission, established in the 1860s. In the vacated basalt country, at the new Bessiebelle run, volcanic depression-pans were utilised to make large sheep washes surrounded by imposing piled ramparts that were all served by capacious races and high-sided stacked tunnels designed to lead and hold the valuable sheep in shelters out of the winds until the beasts were ready for their drenching. It is bravura engineering, made from basalt ready to be animated, strewn in excess all across the seized country.

More recently, capacious labour has been poured into the famous dry-stone boundary-walls that flow along farm-edges throughout the Stony Rises. From the late nineteenth century until the Second World War, legions of wall-makers inundated the Stony Rises, coming for several generations, hailing from Scotland, Ireland, Italy and the west country of England. The wallers made a mosaic of the land. Thousands of paddocks were cleared and girded, numberless millions of hefty stones getting crunched one on another in rough but

elegant ridges. Prodigious exertion. Generation upon generation. Right the way across this pulsing country, the ground received all these shuttling placements of stone. Marking every heft were the countless human heartbeats that have pushed so much colonial energy into the pulsing country. The walls are a record.

From atop any volcanic hill in the Stony Rises, the walls can be seen flowing across the district. Inside the intricate structure of every rampart, there's a flowing pattern of mutual support – any one stone dependent on several other stones environing – a pattern which gives the whole structure a rough integrity which is the plan of robustness. Calligraphic rhythm-lines run along the unmortared junctures crazing amongst all the stones. Secured only by gravity and surface-tension along contact-points, the edges of the stacked stones press upon each other to prove how geologic form can combine with the patient but precise wall-maker's pickiness to produce a structure that stands solid but presents to the eye all its woven-through flow patterns. Viewed up close, each wall is like a painting by Ian Fairweather or Brice Marden, or like an abstracted Chinese landscape, or like one

of Emily Kngwarreye's curvaceous, interlocked line-pictures. These aesthetically engineered walls. Arrayed with chunked implicated cohesion. Rough but also exquisite. Ingenious investigations of imbrication, the walls give visible form to dynamics that can be channeled, via the basalt, into tense but bracing relationships. Showing kinetic energy arranged sinuously into something shaped and practically solid, the walls stand as testimony to the fragile rhythms of human work and thought, to some pressing continuity of personal desire and social ambition always negotiating with natural elements in the Rises. The walls show how culture can go interweaving, flowing chancily, contingently and provisionally yet productively in and out of nature.

The Stony Rises show that, as long as human beings have ranged across the basalt plains, the land has determined the actions of its peoples. Culture and nature have always infiltrated each other here, flowing and finding capillary connections amongst the billions of stacking-stones, amongst the many crater lakes and creek runs, amongst the ridged stock-yards and fish-channels. All the raw material

that was left in the country by the millennial flowing of time, all the built forms that can now be found as cultural effects in the country, they have risen and fallen during the pulsing production and reproduction of human generations, indigenous and incursive both, aligning to the natural forces coursing in the sky-soaring weather and the grounded basaltic morphology.

Legions of Gunditjmarra have poured their work and imagination into the Stony Rises. In concert with the enormous natural energies that first made the place, the people who have stayed and flourished here – indigenous and incursive both – have always ridden the pulses of the volcanic country, have always taken energy and momentum from it as they moved the basalt residues and as they moved with the affects the curated stones have always offered to human endeavour.

For good and for sad. There are two beautiful long walls that run across five large allotments of Crown Land close to the eel traps. These walls are called ‘The Serpentine’ and ‘The Blacks’. They were

built during the late 1880s by gangs of Aboriginal labourers who were indentured forcibly from the Lake Condah mission. These press-ganged wall-builders were descendants of the Eumeralla warriors, heirs of the people who constructed the massive aquaculture filigrees.

More flow, another bitter flush: the Lake Condah Mission was eventually shut down in 1918, with a large draft of the local people being siphoned off to Lake Tyers, radically different country, seven hundred kilometers on the other side of Victoria.

As the century turned and governments and pastoral families vied over the Lake Condah environs, many Gunditjmarra continued to ‘squat’ in the mission buildings until the 1940s, when most of the land was granted to Soldier Settlement schemes as rewards for World War Two veterans flowing back home from the grim world. Notably, homecoming black soldiers were deemed ineligible for the grants. Even so, squads of Gunditjmarra stayed on their country, dossing in

ruins and keeping their water-knowledge eking in the stone-country from generation to generation. During the 1950s, Government forces moved in with machinery that knocked down the major bluestone structures last remaining on the mission-grounds: the church and the remnant dormitories. Once again the basalt moved about. Once again the Gundijmara stayed staunch. Until in 1987, a big draft of country was yielded back to the first owners: the mission-grounds and the majority proportion of soldier-settlement plots that had failed and been abandoned.

But across the vast remainder of the Rises, the colonists have used the stones to transform and mark out their claimed territories. The newcomers have made stone walls so as to remember where their edges have been agreed – one grabbed property pressed against another – and to assert what best to do with each portion.

Paradoxically, even as they have constricted the Rises, the walls have also flowed across the country, constructing and maintaining it with a prodigious

push of labour resembling some of the work (albeit a tiny comparative fraction) that was invested throughout centuries by the Gunditjmarra.

Once again, with the influx of the settlers, the basalt has been moving. Once again the basalt has channeled the amnesia and the remembrance of the country's inhabitants. Once again it has guided particular animals – after colonization the governed animals have been sheep and sometimes rabbits, and beef cattle later on, rather than eels – along causeways that serve human beings who have shifted millions of stones.

# 6 Country bestowing

The Australian landscape is strewn with the debris of systems that were once functional and robust. These include:

indigenous practices of hunting and farming;

narrative testimonies and mythologies that allow the storage and recovery of lore;

endemic ecologies;

also

some ancient procedures of land-husbandry that have been recently imported, such as peasant customs of agrarian placemaking;

plus

the metropolitan urbanism of modern Western cultures.

Since the Europeans arrived in the Rises, amidst all the importation, some native knowledge has lapsed secretly quiet, which is not to say it has ceased to exist.

However, there can be no way round the fact that crucial batches of lore have been permanently forgotten in the Rises too.

Which means there is much to *imagine* now, if we want to supplement whatever ancient portions of country-knowledge abide.

In the Rises and farther afield, the health of human existence depends upon the continuing production of surplus animation, which must now be served by *imagination* almost as much as by historical recall.

Indeed, the best approach to generating the surplus now is to add strong fictive speculation to what remains of remembrance.

REMEMBRANCE. It is a paradoxical word drawn from two roots:

‘memor’ – to be mindful

&

‘membrum’ – a limb.

When you remember, you put

a body of knowledge

back together in your mind

by coordinating some

disaggregated,

wasted

or

severed **members** of the  
corpus that was once known.

Accessing memory, you re-member a slew of dismembered fragments. The fragments are what is left of lived experience after time's abrasive forgetting has let decay descend. With memory you retrieve remnants from oblivion so that you can *organize* the past-separated thoughts and feelings, so that you can put a dismembered phenomenon back together again as a re-enlivened thing.

Remembrance is a reanimation, surplus to oblivion. Having integrated the organs of a living experience that has been dismembered by amnesiac time the memorialist helps the experience live again as an integrated entity rescued from the erosions that the past enacts. On a social scale, this is the work of culture, thriving in nature, abiding in time, reviving in the transaction of what is most vital to know, generation to generation.

Remembrance can keep vital portions of the cultural world persisting undead.

Remembrance can help an inhabited landscape stay known as a live thing, sensible as an integrated body flushed with circulating lifeblood that is always pulsing, spending and replenishing.

Not just a staunch against the loss and anxiety in amnesia, remembrance can also orchestrate a dependable influx of joy.

Remembrance is energy against inertness. It is the might of the lively and the guarantee of the undead.

Remembrance is what lives even now in the basalt that is arrayed in vast patterns that are cultural and natural, all across the Stony Rises.

## NOTES

- 1 Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 105.
- 2 1964 Address to Wesleyan University, Connecticut. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bChLQICcAUE>.)
- 3 Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. ix.
- 4 Harrison, p. 40.

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## Further Reading

Start with the “Lake Condah and Tyrendarra Nomination for Engineering Heritage Recognition” that was prepared in 2011 under the auspices of Engineering Heritage Australia (Newcastle).

It can be found online at:

<https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/portal/system/files/engineering-heritage-australia/nomination-title/Budj%20Bim%20Lake%20Condah%20Nomination.pdf>

Then, for details:

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and Kerrup Jmara Aboriginal Corporation, *Lake Condah: Heritage Management Plan and Strategy*. Melbourne: Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, 1993.

Builth, H, *The Archaeology and Socio-Economy of the Gunditjmarra: a Landscape Approach*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Adelaide: Flinders University. 2002. Builth, H. 2003.

Bulith, H, P. Kershaw et al, “Environmental and cultural change on the Mt Eccles lava-flow landscapes of southwest Victoria, Australia” in *The Holocene* (May 2008), 18(3), pp. 413-424.

Lourandos, H, “Aboriginal settlement and land use in south western Victoria: A report on current field work, in *The Artefact* (1976) 1(4), pp.174-93.

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Wolski, N, *Brushing Against the Grain: Excavating for Aboriginal-European Interaction on the Colonial Frontier in western Victoria, Australia*. Unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2000.

PLUS... The best ways of reading the Stony Rises are (1) to go driving and walking there and (2) to get in touch with the locals: <http://www.budjbintours.com/>

PLUS... Follow the campaign for the World Heritage Listing of the aquaculture infrastructure. Latest development: in early 2017 the Gunditjmara engineering was placed on an official “World Heritage Tentative List”, preparatory to full UNESCO designation. See: <http://www.environment.gov.au/minister/frydenberg/media-releases/mr20170120.html>



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individuals and through Arts Tasmania by the Miniſter for the Arts;  
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In teeming numbers the eels move through this vibrant world of water. Arriving during the rainy season when the remnant-lakes swell and the volcanic plain fills like a colander in a tub, the eels leave the salt water, summoned to the freshwater by a baffling endocrinal change that compels them landward to furlough as another kind of fish for a while.

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