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**'Murphy, do you want to delete this?' Hidden histories and hidden landscapes in the Murchison and Davenport ranges, Northern Territory, Australia.**

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## **'Murphy, do you want to delete this?' Hidden histories and hidden landscapes in the Murchison and Davenport ranges, Northern Territory, Australia.**

### **Abstract**

[Extract] During Easter in 2000 we (AP and NG) were in Central Australia during heavy rainfalls and flooding. Roads were cut and we were stuck in Tennant Creek. We decided to review documents held by the local museum. This included material used in the late 1970s to compile a general history of Tennant Creek, the only such work of which we are aware. It was interesting to note that in one case the author had written to a pastoralist they had recently visited, and included a section describing the role of Aboriginal people at their station. In brackets after this section the author asked the pastoralist: 'do you want to delete this?' The final published version indicates the pastoralist chose to exercise their power of veto. In Central Australia, there is a small and growing collection of such local histories. They are often celebratory of pioneer settlement and driven by a concern that the 'pioneer' past of the Northern Territory needs to be documented before it is lost (Gill Forthcoming). These local histories constitute a significant means by which the past and its attendant social and political arrangements and relations are revalidated. To a contemporary audience they reaffirm the actions and values of non-indigenous people in the Northern Territory's past. In so doing they 'transcend nostalgia' (Lowenthal 1985) and form a body of public history in which the values of the dominant 'whitefella culture' are reaffirmed and made available as history. Through these public histories, local events and national narratives of history and identity intersect (Rose & Lewis 1992).

### **Keywords**

Indigenous, aborigines, Australia, northern territory, pastoralism, mining, Murchison ranges, davenport ranges

### **Disciplines**

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**‘Murphy, do you want to delete this?’ Hidden histories and hidden landscapes in the Murchison and Davenport ranges, Northern Territory, Australia.<sup>1</sup>**

**Hiding History in the Northern Territory**

During Easter in 2000 we (AP and NG) were in Central Australia during heavy rainfalls and flooding. Roads were cut and we were stuck in Tennant Creek. We decided to review documents held by the local museum. This included material used in the late 1970s to compile a general history of Tennant Creek, the only such work of which we are aware.

It was interesting to note that in one case the author had written to a pastoralist they had recently visited, and included a section describing the role of Aboriginal people at their station. In brackets after this section the author asked the pastoralist: 'do you want to delete this?' The final published version indicates the pastoralist chose to exercise their power of veto.

In Central Australia, there is a small and growing collection of such local histories. They are often celebratory of pioneer settlement and driven by a concern that the 'pioneer' past of the Northern Territory needs to be documented before it is lost (Gill Forthcoming). These local histories constitute a significant means by which the past and its attendant social and political arrangements and relations are revalidated. To a contemporary audience they reaffirm the actions and values of non-indigenous people in the Northern Territory's past. In so doing they 'transcend nostalgia' (Lowenthal 1985) and form a body of public history in which the values of the dominant 'whitefella culture' are reaffirmed and made available as history. Through these public histories, local events and national narratives of history and identity intersect (Rose & Lewis 1992).

The mediated absence of Aboriginal people at the station described here is not unique in Northern Territory historiography. Indeed it has been suggested that social amnesia

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and the imagined absence of Aboriginal people is particularly evident and acute in the public history of the Northern Territory and in northern Australia (Riddett 1995; Rose 1991). In these practices, idealised distinctions between settler and Aboriginal lives, histories and realms are maintained both in the past, present, and in visions of future (for a discussion of such issues in Tennant Creek Edmunds 1995).

### **Hidden Histories/Hidden Landscapes**

There are geographies to these histories. The separateness of settler and indigenous realms in settler history and culture is reflected in the landscapes that are created both materially and imaginatively. Upon the absences within these landscape can be constructed the myth of the self-made pioneer in a new land, and the settler's ever variable opposite number; the wild, the dangerous, the acquiescent, the childlike, or the faithful Aboriginal.

The geographies that are part of the dominant histories of the north are geographies of uniformity and well-defined boundaries (Howitt 2001). They are based upon the separation of indigenous and settler realms and the geographic expression of this in categories such as Aboriginal reserves and land, missions, pastoral leases, stock routes, and national parks (Howitt 2001; Nash 1984).

In this process of spatial separation and delineation many of the specifics of the multiple ways a space or site was/is actually inhabited and used are lost. Where contrasting stories are to be told of the same landscape, a separation in time or a representation of Aboriginal people as acquiescent or complicit in settlement, is a strategy for avoiding reconsideration of the foundations of outback mythology. More complex stories of co-existence between settler and Aboriginal people, and of the landscapes and people who do not readily occupy predetermined niches remain largely absent from public history and from public geographies.

To overwrite uniformity in Northern Territory history, landscapes not founded on the geographies of uniformity and boundaries need to be considered (Howitt 2001). Such landscapes will include the diversity of ways in which land was inhabited and the points and places at which settler and Aboriginal lives intersected. These will be

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landscapes in which the uni-polar perspective of the settler self, will be replaced by a multcentred approach to landscape, one in which diversity, not uniformity will be a defining characteristic (Howitt 2001; Mitchell 2001).

How can we delineate alternative landscapes to create historical and geographical frameworks that will form the basis for more inclusive stories of locality, region and nation? How can the contingency and diversity of Northern Territory landscapes be illustrated in such a way as to provide a foil to homogenizing and bounded landscapes that currently dominate? In relation to public history, Rose and Lewis (1992) suggest an approach built on specific sites, and the recovery of meaning and interaction at those sites. The specifics of settler/indigenous interaction can provide insights with which to insinuate cracks into histories and landscapes founded upon separation and spatial differentiation. To build on their argument, the presences at, and absences from, particular places contribute to the character of landscapes. Presenting different versions of presence and reinserting people and habitations made absent, in a manner grounded in places, offers a powerful antidote to colonizing landscapes. Individuals, groups and nations find identity in landscape. Settlers in Australia have asserted this through projecting the certainty and the primacy of their landscapes onto their lives, onto Aboriginal people, into history, and onto the land. An aim of this project is to illustrate the fragile nature of such 'certainty' and to counterpose it to other subjectivities, shared spaces, lives and interactions.

### **The Landscape of a Life: Murphy Kennedy**

This paper accesses one landscape in the Tennant Creek area (Figure 1), that of Warumungu man, Murphy Kennedy. Murphy is now in his seventies and has spent his life working on stations and at mining settlements. His experience includes the time of Aboriginal employment on stations, life at ration depots and Welfare Branch settlements, the arrival of land rights, the return of his traditional lands, and a period as a cattle station manager. These life experiences have brought Murphy into contact with the land and others who have inhabited it in myriad ways. Murphy's life history and his recollections point not only to a multi-faceted Aboriginal landscape, but also to settler occupation and use of the land in ways that also elude uniform compositions of landscape. For example, many of the sites we have visited are associated with settler pastoralists who align closely with Rowse's (1998) description of 'feral pastoralists'. Also featuring alongside such 'ferals' are their mixed descent Aboriginal

employees and associates, their wives and children, and their tactics in avoiding the authorities in the rugged Murchison ranges (Figure 1). Such pastoralists do not fit neatly in the conventional tale of station establishment, families, and the growth of solid communities found in Northern Territory pastoral culture (Gill Forthcoming; for an example see Powell & McRae 1996).

We have attempted to access landscapes in this study through several means. With Murphy we have visited places he remembers. These have included settlements, pastoral outstations, missionary camps, places where Aboriginal people lived or briefly visited, and key sites related to the pastoral and mining industries. These site visits have acted as mnemonic triggers, as Murphy maintains a clear memory of how these places were occupied and used. Many of these visits were to places related to pastoralism, as Murphy was aware of our interest in these places and his knowledge has been invaluable in interpreting how the pastoral system functioned. Additionally, Murphy's account indicates how the physical landscape was negotiated by Aboriginal people and others. A map of Murphy's life provides a structure which visually represents his memories of work, family, and aspects of his traditional obligations and knowledge (Figure 2). Most of the places in this map are settlements, each with a complement of ancillary work and social places. These are all in turn linked by pathways.

All of these places contain material culture: in campsites, holding yards, mission stations, government bores, and settlements. This is a type of material evidence which has rarely been used by archaeologists in historic contexts (Carment 1993) to address questions about the organization of Aboriginal and settler society. As most of the material culture lays on the surface and does not require sub-surface excavation, the recording of archaeological sites involved surveying the distribution of artefacts. These maps are linked to a database which records the characteristics of each artefact: what it is, when it was made, what its possible function was. This form of spatial analysis is well developed in archaeology, particularly in ethnoarchaeological studies in America (Kent 1984) and Australia (O'Connell 1987). There are scales of evidence in the archaeological record: from the smallest level of artefact/activity area, to site analysis, to regional analysis. This scalar approach provides a means to link individual sites to interpretations of landscapes, as detailed elsewhere in Australia (Birmingham 2000; Clarke 2000; Fullagar & Head 1999; Paterson 1999; Paterson 2000).

In addition to the archaeological and oral evidence, documentary sources have been studied, including land-tenure records, biographies, mission records, and police records. As field-recording is still underway, the analysis of this disparate evidence is not complete. However it is possible to indicate some preliminary results from this research.

### **Kelly Well**

Kelly Well illustrates some of these themes (Figure 1). This site has had multiple uses over time. It is the site of a soak used by Aboriginal people (*Balgallgi*) which was reported by John McDouall Stuart (1865), where a well was sunk in 1875, and during the 1930s-1950s was an important stage on the north-south droving route with extensive yards and a cattle dip (Pearce 1984). There are material remains of all of these activities in the forms of wells and yards. There are also material remains of camps that appear to result from distinctive uses of the site. The most extensive remains originate from Aboriginal settlement in the forms of huts, fireplaces, tool making areas, and alcohol drinking sites (Figure 3). A diverse range of cultural material is included in this settlement, including material such as ochre, grinding tools, stone and glass tools, and traded items such as decorated shell pendants originating from the Kimberly coast.

Other material remains relate to the use of a set of pig yards adjacent to the main cattle and sheep yards, and located close to the Aboriginal settlement. We are interested in past relationships between these two elements of Kelly Well. Land records indicate that Kelly Well was used from the 1930s onwards by Tennant Creek butchers as a means to access meat products from the pastoralists in the Murchison Ranges. The butchers – Fazal Deen and Jimmy Traylen – are remembered by Murphy, as he was involved in bringing cattle out to Kelly Well. At that time Aboriginal people were banned from Tennant Creek, but the butchers would bring alcohol, tobacco and food out to the Kelly Well camp and butcher the cattle on site. It appears that the pigs were sustained by the offal and other unwanted cattle parts. The remains of the camping episodes at the pig yards are well preserved, as discarded food scraps and rubbish were placed in the drums forming the yards, perhaps as a means to weigh them down (Figure 4). This archaeological material is being analysed for dietary, functional, and temporal information.

One interesting aspect of the information from Kelly Well is that it provides a complementary – yet different – account to Murphy’s recollections. Murphy remembers how this site functioned as a nodal point linking a range of pastoral enterprises in the Murchison ranges with Tenant Creek, and as a site associated with longer droving routes in northern Australia. His account of social and economic relationships with butchers and drovers tells us much about how this place worked. However, Murphy does not recall much about the Aboriginal settlement at Kelly Well reported here, which seems to be post-1950 in use, nor does he know much about the ways in which other travelers used this major watering place on the post 1860s north-south route. The archaeological remains of these uses of Kelly Well provide different perspectives of social and economic processes which complement Murphy’s account.

### **Work as Landscape**

Murphy’s life can mapped out to illustrate the points of convergence and divergence between the Aboriginal and settler realms. The process of mapping out his life also shows the complexity and diversity of meanings of various places. Figure 2 is one way in which Murphy’s life can be mapped out according to the various places that feature in his recollections. Following the numbers provides a rough chronology of events and places. It should not be taken as a literal record of what Murphy did and when. As most of our site visits with Murphy are to sites on his own land, and much of the area covered in the map lies to the south it includes places we have not yet visited. As Murphy talked he would recall places and events left out earlier in conversations, and they would be duly inserted. No doubt gaps remain.

Nonetheless, we have chosen to begin our writing of this project with this map as it illustrates the nature and diverse character of the landscape of an Aboriginal man in the Murchison-Davenport Ranges area living in two realms, and who occupies landscape created in terms of both.

The map largely focuses on the time before land rights. It is a time when many Aboriginal people were part of the pastoral economy, when stations depended on Aboriginal workers, when Aboriginal people resided in station camps, and were subject to the vagaries of the cycles of cattle work, the personalities of station managers and owners, and to the system of Aboriginal welfare.



Murphy's work map shows how he moved around constantly from place to place and station to station. The same places crop up in this narrative over and over again, although at times for different reasons. Murphy drops in and out of the pastoral economy, leaving when he has Aboriginal business to attend to. We will use some examples to illustrate the various meanings places have and how Murphy lived in the settler and Aboriginal realms.

Murphy describes his work at Frew River, then Kurundi as his first 'real' jobs. It was on these stations that he learnt the horse and cattle skills he would continue to employ for decades to come. His station life was spatially concentrated around Kurundi, Elkedra and Epanarra stations (Figure 1). These are stations close to Murphy's country, and they afforded access to both his own traditional lands and to older Aboriginal people from whom he could learn.

At Kurundi Murphy honed his stockman's skills. These skills led him to work all around the country as stations needed workers with a range of skills such as riding bronco horses in yards, breaking in horses, building yards, sinking bores, putting up windmills, and working cattle (Figure 5). Work at Kurundi also took him all over land that he knows well today both in Aboriginal and pastoral terms. Many of Murphy's more detailed site-based pastoral recollections on the north-east of the Murchison ranges, including the Kelly Well stories, date from time at Kurundi working for George Birchmore.

Murphy's recollections are littered with places he worked. His memories of work include training racehorses at Elekedra, putting up a holding paddock at Epanarra, building yards at Hatches Creek and Rooney's yard, and having a row with the manager at Jim Lewis yard on Kurundi. These places define a pastoral landscape, often using the names of those settlers credited with their construction, but clearly they are also part of a landscape of Aboriginal movement in, around, and out of the pastoral industry.

Like many Aboriginal people in this era, Murphy was able remain on or near his country through his station employment. At various times, this allowed Murphy to leave the stations to pursue his own concerns and live away from the stations. He

describes one such period, the attractions of the stations, and the transition back to station work:

MJK: No, well, when, I bin went back with a big mob of people, you know, walking about round bush. So I bin join in with that really bush mob, bin walking around there, eating bush tucker, bush meat, then we went back to, we was looking for tobacco. So we had to, we went to Elkedra station, we seen old Jack Sprat, old half caste bloke.

NG: When you were walking around with that bush mob, where were you walking, which country?

MJK: Oh, Hatches Creek, between Hatches Creek, Elkedra, we bin walk back through there, I bin follow the mob, people walking round.

AP: That was after Kurundi?

MJK: After the Kurundi.

NG: You came looking for tobacco at Elkedra?

MJK: We went for, you know, we was going to get tobacco properly. Then we went to Elkedra. And this old Jack Sprat, he had horses, some racehorse, training, station horse. When old whathisname was there, old Johnny Driver.

NG: Was Jack Sprat working for Driver?

MJK: Yeah, working. He bin training whatshisname, racehorse, he bin training horses there. So when he see me, he said to me, "oh that's good, we looking for horseman", you know, you got that what I mean?

AP: Yeah yeah, you were good with horses.

NG : He knew you.

MJK: Yeah, he know me, old Jack Sprat, he's half caste bloke. He bin working for Kennedy and Bill Riley, Elkedra. But, Elkedra, what, Kennedy and whatshisname, Kennedy and whathisname, Bill Riley, went away.

Kurinelli, a small gold mining area plays a recurring role in Murphy's stories. One of the miners was a Chinese man called Jimmy Campfoo, who according to Murphy, had an Aboriginal wife and numerous Aboriginal people working for him. Murphy went there at least twice after arguments with station managers.

Kurnelli seems to have provided a place where Aboriginal people were able to gather and be relatively free from settler control, while retaining access to employment and goods such as tobacco and food from Campfoo. Kurinelli plays an important role in Murphy's education as a Warumungu man. While still a young man, Murphy left Epanarra station and went to Kurinelli to be educated, the results of which retain their relevance today:

MJK: No I didn't married yet. Had to come back and sit down with the old blackfellas, learn about Aboriginal way, you know ceremony way, with old Lame Tommy. At Kurinelli, I bin just sitting, I wasn't working, nothing.

AP: This was Kurinelli?

MJK: Yeah, Kurinelli mine there. I had to come back and sit down there. Oh long time. Kurinelli. I bin sit down there.

NG: With Lame Tommy?

MJK: With Lame Tommy, old people, just to learn about ceremony, ceremony about Warupunju people.

AP: Murphy, why then? Why did you go there then? Did someone say, "Murphy you come back to Kurinelli and you learn about this business", or did you...?

MJK: Well, old fella, we bin really, want to, we was wondering that way. Young people. We was wondering, want to learn about the country.

AP: You wanted to?

MJK: Ya, so we got to come back to old people and, so we can show the ceremony. Country, you know. That ceremony, holding country. Just like the map you gottim. Just like a map. That's why people got to come back, well he knows the country, all over. You know, Warupunju, just like you say Queensland. Like Queensland. Warupunju, well that mean just like a Queensland. So we had to come back and sit down with old Lame Tommy. Lot of old people bin around there. Alyawarra people, Warumungu people, bin come together, and sit down. Do some ah, you know, do some Aboriginal way, doing some business and all that, bin doing it. So we bin learn him little bit about the country, you know, Aboriginal way. I bin there

for long time, I never start work, I bin sitting down there a long time, with old blackfellas...Well you got to know the country, because a lot of people come and ask us questions.

AP: Now?

MJK: Now. Yeah. Come and you know.

AP: Its good that you learnt.

MJK: Yeah, well you learn, you know a bit about your country. Well you can talk about something. You know, whether lawyer, anthropologist, anthropologist, they ask you all sorts of questions, you know: "You know your country?" That's what they come and ask you (22/6/00).

Kurinelli was clearly a place that fulfilled a variety of roles for various groups of people. It was a mining area, and thus part of one story of the European occupation and development of the area. It was also a site that was occupied in a dual way. Aboriginal people and non-indigenous people were both able to profitably use the resources available to further their economic and cultural interests. This was a place shared by (at least) two cultures, and there are points of connection as surely as there are separations.

The material considered in this paper demonstrates the different ways in which we are attempting to interpret landscapes - past through to present - in the Murchison Ranges. The different types of evidence are proving to relate in differential ways to each other, which is hardly surprising given the forms of evidence. Murphy's recollections provide a deeply personal and powerful way of understanding a range of 20th century activities in this region. The archaeology provides a different form of evidence, about the timing and nature of human activity and patterns of settlement, some of which are familiar to Murphy, others less so. Documentary evidence is also providing some important evidence, particularly in relation to land tenure and use over time.

Following our introductory discussion of hidden landscapes and histories, this research appears to provide a different account of 20th century life in the Davenport-Murchison Ranges area, one which highlights people left out or generalised in previous historical narratives of the region. At a regional scale, Murphy's work landscape illustrates a distinctively Aboriginal perspective of the period of welfare

and pastoral employment. His landscape is characterized by spaces shared in various ways and to various extents by Aboriginal and non-indigenous people, as well as by the agency of Aboriginal people living under restrictive conditions. The archaeological, oral and archival evidence from sites such as Kelly Well and Kurinelli, illustrates the value of a grounded and site-based approach to writing histories. Were we to rely on any one of the sources used, we would have a lesser understanding of the use and meanings of these places. In Murphy's landscape, and in the case of Kurinelli and Kelly Well, we see a history of the region which encompasses 'separate domains' but which are 'nonetheless mutually embedded in each other so that to sever them is to perform an amputation' (Rose & Lewis 1992: 36). The potential promise and reward of this research lie in bearing witness to Murphy's multi-centered landscape, and in working with the concept of landscape to complement and extend his personal stories into public histories of the region.

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**Figure 1.** Tennant Creek and Murchison-Davenport Ranges area







**Figure 3.** Remains of Aboriginal huts at Kelly Well



**Figure 4.** Quantification of food remains, ceramics and glass from the pig yards, Kelly Well.



**Figure 5.** Murphy at the remains of Tjinjarra blockyards he built with ‘feral’ pastoralist Sid Boon in the 1930s-1950s