

Telling Country: Exploring the Cross-cultural Complexities of Place in the History of Northeast Tasmania

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In this brief paper and related demonstration, we discuss several of the more important intellectual, ethical and technical issues associated with creating an online resource exploring the meanings and values of landscape and place in the Aboriginal history of northeast Tasmania during the early colonial period. An important feature of this resource is an edition of the journal kept by George Augustus Robinson (1791-1866) during his so-called 'Friendly Mission' to the Aboriginal Tasmanian peoples of the northeast between October 1830 and October 1831. This journal is one of a series in which he meticulously recorded on a daily basis observations of places, people and events he encountered during his five year mission to persuade Aboriginal Tasmanians to leave their ancestral home-lands on the Tasmanian mainland and to be eventually placed under government protection on Flinders Island in eastern Bass Strait.

Robinson's journals have long been recognized by anthropologists and historians as the most important written source of testimony about the life-ways and culture of Aboriginal Tasmanians at the time of colonial invasion, and about events during 1820s and 1830s that were profoundly to shape the destinies of both Aboriginal peoples and settlers, especially in northeast Tasmania and the Strait islands. In addition, Robinson's journals provide a comprehensive and detailed account of the landscape through which he moved and the places in which he and Aboriginal clanspeople made contact. Rarely, if ever, has very much attention been paid to this dimension. Nor have these landscapes and places been surveyed with this aspect of their history in mind. Furthermore, until now an opportunity has not been provided for Tasmanian Aborigines to be directly involved in the examination and re-interpretation of the journals and their content. The initiative in which we are involved redresses this deficit and allows the work to come alive like never before.

Publishing the Robinson's 1830-31 journal online with annotations, reflections and essays in textual and audio-visual formats by both Tasmanian Aboriginal researchers, knowledge custodians and non-Indigenous researchers in a range of disciplines, will be an important contribution to Australian historiography. Having said this, one cannot discount the achievements of earlier generations of scholarship; but it has only been since the 1970s that the continuity and ongoing dynamism of Aboriginal Tasmanian culture has come to be widely appreciated, thanks to the work of Aboriginal Tasmanian intellectuals and revisionist historians, notably Stephen Murray-Smith, Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds. However, more recent research by Patsy Cameron indicates how much historical revision yet needs to be undertaken, and that critical reinterpretation of Robinson's journals is essential to this task. Much of the historiography of Aboriginal-settler relations in northeast Tasmania has drawn its strength from what are clearly conceptually limited interpretations of Robinson's observations of places and the peoples

and events he therein encountered. For Tasmanian Aboriginal people the work of telling their history in its true richness and complexity is only just beginning.

We intend using Robinson's journeying as points of departure, from which to investigate and re-appraise salient themes in the history of northeast Tasmania from the late 1820s to the present day. Central to these investigations is an appreciation of the fundamental importance of places and landscapes in reclaiming the past. Places connects the ancestral past with the communal present in obvious and also in many subtle ways. Disclosing the phenomenology of these connections is one aim of our project. To this end the research team, along with Elders and community members are involved in physically retracing and re-mapping the course of the 'Friendly Mission' through northeast Tasmania. This form of 're-enactment' was conceived simultaneously as a narrative strategy and a research tool. By walking in Robinson's footsteps we set out not to dramatise a past that is already known, but to learn something new about the past through the activity of 're-enactment' itself. These insights, digitally conveyed, add considerable depth to our understanding of the dynamic and complex relations between people and places, past and present.

For this reason our strategy has been to work on developing ICT tools and infrastructure enabling participants freely to interpret places of prime historical and cultural significance in the natural and built landscape in what are agreed to be the most appropriate media forms. For as various Indigenous online history and heritage project undertaken over the past decade have shown, there are conceptual and ethical limitations on relying solely on the printed word to explain many aspects of the past, given the epistemological and ontological weight that oral, visual and kinesthetic modes of communication have in many cultures in representing the past. It goes without saying that present-day Tasmanian Aborigines are concerned that this venture in history making proceeds under their ownership and control. How the experiences of their ancestors are represented is obviously of crucial importance. In association, we are faced with capacity issues related to connecting Aboriginal knowledges and experiences with their digital representations and supporting this with a culturally appropriate hermeneutic framework in the online environment. Abstract concepts are notoriously difficult to communicate without the additional complication that their expression in digital media presents. Can we properly disclose the quality of place-based phenomena in the online environment? The question is even weightier when one considers the cultural and cross-cultural imperatives that a project such as ours generates. These issues all have serious implications for how we adequately represent the Aboriginal history of northeast Tasmania in networked digital form.

Alongside these abstract and philosophical questions are those of more practical concern. There is the question of the development of a suitable ontology to interrelate in meaningful ways not only newly generated sources of knowledge, but also a wealth of digital surrogates of relevant historical sources. A proportion of these sources will be created by researchers involved in this project; but we will also be drawing upon digital collections placed online by leading state and national cultural institutions, with a view to linking them to the project in ways that apprise users of the meanings and values these

surrogates of historical and cultural artifacts have for the peoples whose history is being told.

So far our ontological modeling has focused on how best we can exploit the growing body of relevant resources placed online by museums and digital libraries. Drawing on Turnbull's previous experience in working with the National Library of Australia and the Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre, we have sought to integrate custom programming within an open source content management system (Plone) enabling us to represent digital surrogates of historical documents, images and cultural artifacts in accordance with the CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model. The CIDOC-CRM is a complex standard to work with, but it has the obvious advantage of having evolved over the past decade under auspices of the International Council of Museums, to become a widely used international framework by which virtually all cultural heritage information in digital forms embodying the standard held by museums, libraries and other cultural institutions can be meaningfully interrelated with this project. Moreover, the standard extends to describing places and built structures of historical significance, and there is potential for mapping between GIS data and sources described using CIDOC-CRM.

A key question, however, is whether a CIDOC-CRM based ontology is capable of being used to describe and manage the digital resources we are creating under the direction of Aboriginal research colleagues and community knowledge custodians. One could argue that even using a relatively simple ontology—as Turnbull, for example, derived from the International Council on Archives guide for creating authority records, and employed in creating an online edition of James Cook's journal of his first Pacific Voyage—allows for easy management and interconnection of materials in various historical forms while yet fostering users' awareness and understanding of how natural and human phenomena can be perceived in differently enculturated ways. Nonetheless, given that until very recently Indigenous ways of knowing the past have been perceived as epistemologically inferior to the assumptions and practices sustaining European historiography, there is understandably concern on the part of both Indigenous colleagues and knowledge custodians whether the cultural integrity of their knowledge could be compromised by its being classified according to western ways of conceptualizing cultural heritage developed by institutions which, in many instances, are custodians of objects that were procured in course of colonial expropriation of land and policies aimed at the destruction of Indigenous life-ways and culture. Indeed, the very concept of heritage is problematic for some knowledge custodians because of its perceived origins in colonialist ambition.

We are reasonably confident that this issue can be resolved through the governance and consultative frameworks within which it is being undertaken. However, we are conscious that a further complicating factor is that ontologically, many aspects of being and existence are hidden in substrates of conventionalities and unarticulated assumptions that rarely if ever are subjected to distanced, objective scrutiny. It follows that when they are subjected to scrutiny in cross-cultural dialogue there is the risk of conceptual translation eliding or obscuring important elements of how relations between entities in the world are understood. Further, as evidenced by research so far undertaken in identifying places of significance in Robinson's journeying in north-eastern Tasmania,

there is knowledge of things that is subject to cultural proscriptions on who can know, the extent of that knowledge and in what circumstances it can be imparted.

Another related challenge is to ensure that whatever ontological assumptions inform the technical processes enabling the creation and publication of this venture's outcomes, the outcomes are integrable within Australia's emerging national infrastructure for e-research in the humanities and social sciences. Whereas the scholarly monograph and articles in learned journals are likely to remain prime media for the dissemination, appraisal and reinterpretation of historical research, an increasing number of historians are employing networked digital media as both tools for research and the creation of digital artifacts presenting new interpretations of past phenomena. What is more, there is growing awareness amongst practitioners of history in networked digital media that their work must possess the same attributes that have enabled the critical aims and procedures underpinning research and scholarship in print based media to be simulated in the virtual environment. There is still much to be done by way of creating the requisite infrastructure to replicate the same conditions of trust in the exchange and appraisal of knowledge that have long underpinned in printed based scholarly communication. However, in view of the inferior status that Indigenous history making has been accorded by the academy until only recently, it is all the more important that projects such as this, which seek to contest various aspects of the received historiography of Aboriginal Tasmania, enjoy a visible and robust presence in online fora for historical research.