

CHAPTER ONE – THE LIE OF THE LAND

The strangest place in this looking-glass world is where we stand looking into it but fail to see ourselves mirrored there, glimpsing instead the strangeness of our origins. – Paul Carter, Living in a New Country

Auntie Emma Johnston, now in her late eighties, is looking at an old black and white photograph taken some time around 1900 (Figure 1). It depicts a group of Aboriginal men and women in a clearing. Some of the men are standing, holding decorated shields and spears, and adorned with white cockatoo feather headdresses and pearl-shell pendants. Others in the group are sitting, long wooden swords and grass baskets loosely held on their laps. In the background a tangle of rainforest trees, though it is apparent that some have been thinned and even removed. Although the photograph labours to give such an appearance, there is nothing pristine or pre-contact about this scene. The caption on the photograph reads 'Bellenden Ker Blacks', though Auntie Emma knows better than this. Carefully reading the designs on the shields and the ritual cicatrices on the men's bodies, and noting the other forms of material culture displayed in the photograph, Auntie Emma declares the people in the photograph to be "Ngadjon-Jii, my mob".

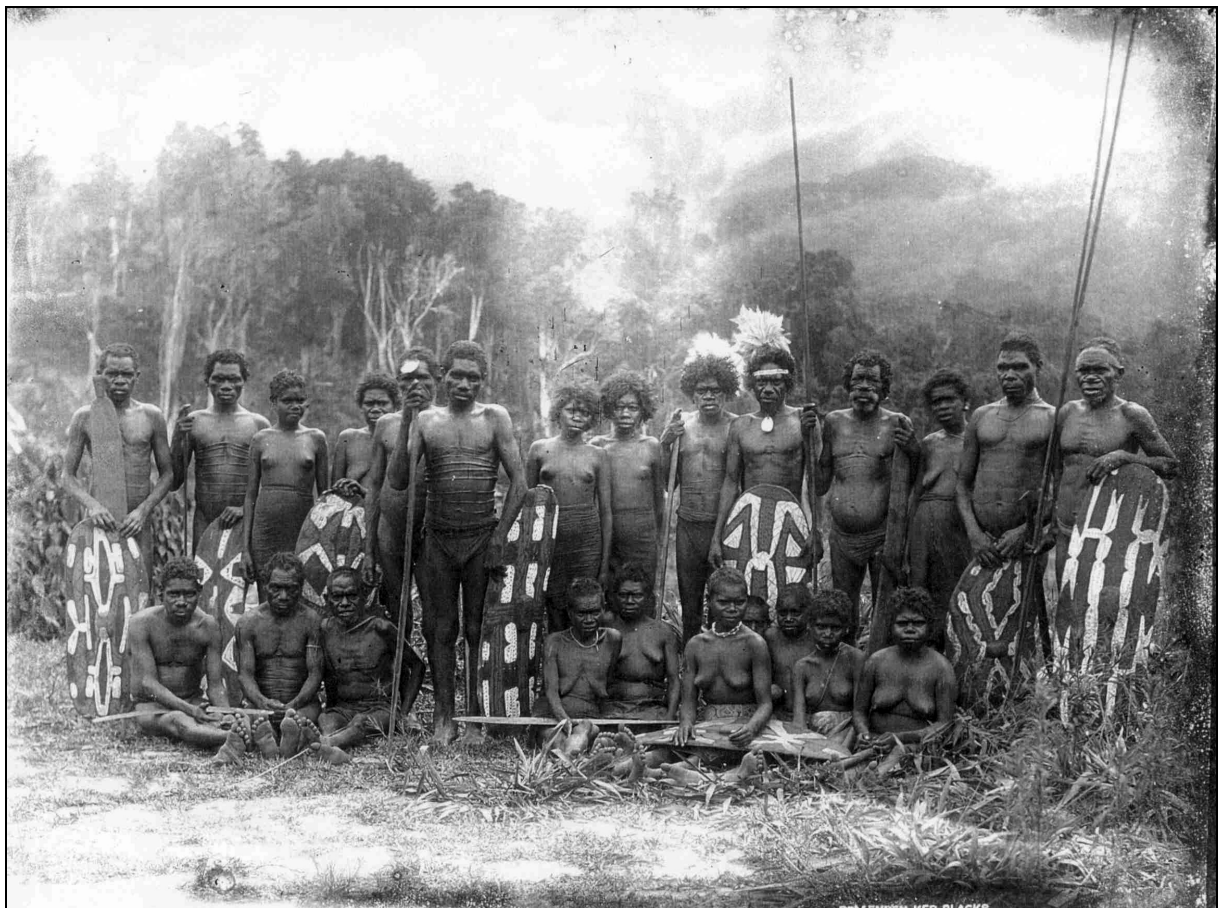


Figure 1: 'Aboriginal group, Bellenden-Ker, with shields, spears and boomerangs' (Photo courtesy of the Cairns Historical Society).

This moment, mediated by an early European photograph and the cultural memories of the oldest Ngadjon-Jii person alive today, succinctly captures the history of Indigenous and settler encounters in the rainforested environments of North Queensland. It points to the kind of cultural assertions and misunderstandings that have characterised these encounters. It also directs our attention to how things have changed. The Ngadjon-Jii descendants of those people captured by the shutter of colonial history continue to live on their traditional lands in what is now the Eacham Shire. The rainforests that formed the backdrop to the staged display of Aboriginal culture in the photograph have gone or exist now as remnant pockets throughout so much of the Atherton Tableland. While large swathes of rainforest have fallen, lost forever in the meticulous clearings of history, the memories of these historical events have not been lost. The cultural journey from the vista of an old photograph taken around the turn of the twentieth century to the new landscapes of this millennium forms the substance of this book.

Yamani Country has its physical locus in the rainforested uplands of Far North Queensland. From the perspective of many ecologists and conservationists these days, the rainforests of Far North Queensland are near mythic landscapes – reflecting the diversity and evolutionary history of non-human life. The relatively recent social construction of these spaces as a ‘pristine wilderness’ was elevated to the status of universal scientific fact when the Wet Tropics were listed in 1988 as a World Heritage Area for its ‘outstanding natural values’. The process of ‘securing the wet tropics’ was marked by ‘intense political battles’ throughout the 1980s, with these contests often characterised in the media in terms of “conservation versus development; forests versus timber” (McDonald and Lane 2000: 3). However, as McDonald and Lane point out, the politics of protecting the ecological values of the region was in fact “far more complex” than these simple dichotomies suggest, and arguably started more than a hundred years ago with the advent of European settlement in the region.

Yamani Country explores some of the complexity and history alluded to by McDonald and Lane. It focuses upon the environmental history of the Malanda district of the Atherton Tableland, located in the heart of the Wet Tropics bioregion (Map 1). In researching this book, I became aware that there is not a single history for this area, but a plurality of histories, and that some of these stories, like the natural history of the region, have already been told and continue to be told over and over again. While others, such as the cultural history of this upland area, are not as well known, or are hinted at through the silences and absences in the written record. In many ways, these latter histories and the people they speak of can be regarded as the ‘lost subjects’ of North Queensland’s colonial history (Carter 1999).

I also came to see that the view of the Wet Tropics as a region of “outstanding scientific importance” (McDonald and Lane 2000: 3) contrasts, and at times competes with, other perspectives which see these forests as ancestral spaces, reflecting social histories of struggle and survival. I am referring here not to the Indigenous occupiers of these forests *per se* but to the Europeans whose forefathers came and cleared the ‘scrub’ of the Atherton uplands. In the textual and photographic narratives of the “hardships and lifestyles of the early [European] settlers” (Cairns and Johnston 1985), Aboriginal people appear as peripheral figures in the agricultural landscapes produced by these pioneering stories. Indeed, it seems from these images of the ‘promised land’, as the Tableland has often been called, that as the trees fell the Aboriginal occupiers also fell out of the picture. In focusing on the edges of this pastoral image, *Yamani Country* attempts to portray a more complex cultural story about the social relations, which are reflected in the landscapes we see today.

In developing this volume, it soon became clear that the various landscapes of the Wet Tropics are as much fashioned by social forces as they are by natural ones. Critical to the production of these landscapes is the role that narrative and storytelling plays in mediating human-environment interactions. These stories, while focused upon local places and people,

are more than just recollections about certain localities or individuals. These local histories reveal experiences that also happened elsewhere in Australia. Stories about Aboriginal dispossession, for example, are not unique to Ngadjon-Jii people or to the Atherton Tableland. These histories provide an important local focus to themes and events that are part of a larger-scale, national discourse.

This book explores the complex, and at times, tragic historical topography of the Malanda region. Local histories paint a vivid picture of the varied nature of Aboriginal engagement with the settler population in this area. This is not a simple tale of Indigenous resistance and European conquest, or necessarily one of widespread environmental degradation. Rather, these histories speak about the ways in which landscapes and identity are co-produced through the intersecting rituals and customary practices of Traditional Owners and Europeans alike. This said, it is important to recognise here that the co-production of these cultural landscapes and social identities is inherently colonising, not only of people but also of the environment. The effects of these colonising moments are histories of people and place, which defy the all too-easy imposition of simple dichotomies and empty stereotypes – ‘noble savages and ignoble settlers’. This volume attempts to recognise some of the social and environmental consequences of these varied, and often hidden, histories.

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIES OF SETTLED AUSTRALIA

Until recently, the environmental story of settled Australia was largely told through the use of scientific narratives. Landscape histories were usually geological ones, or consisted of accounts focused upon longer-term evolutionary processes. And yet, by the 1970s it was clear that the environmental history of this continent was far more nuanced than science and scientists alone could depict. Moreover, the environmental issues associated with changed and often degraded landscapes could not simply be resolved by the application of scientific knowledge itself. In the past couple of decades it has also become apparent that there is a need to know something of more recent histories and past experiences in order to counteract what Stephen Dovers calls the “*ad hocery* and amnesia” (2000: 4) so often associated with environmental policy and management. Hand in hand with these emerging realisations was the development of so-called ‘new’ approaches to environmental management, which emphasised community involvement and recognised the interests of multiple ‘stakeholders’. With the blossoming of community-based, environmental management initiatives, such as the ‘Landcare’ groups that emerged in the 1990s, came the need to bring together ecological histories with more human ones. The ensuing interplay of local oral histories with the methodologies of the natural sciences not only humanised alienating scientific discourses but it also served to relativise the alleged universality of these latter approaches. Oral histories in this context are not simply a case of people reconstructing their past in terms of the present. As Stephen Dovers suggests, the environmental histories created from this intersection of historical and scientific sources are about how “we reconcile the past and present into a story informing future action” (Dovers 2000: 2). Environmental history envisaged in this way goes beyond mere chronologies of people and events. These accounts about the production of landscapes revolve around the power of stories to not only inform the kind of discussions we have about the places we live in, but to also bring about change in the way we interact with these spaces.

In the past couple of decades, environmental histories have been written for many regions in Australia (see Dovers 1994; Rolls 1981; Rosen 1995; Seddon 1994) and for many environment-based industries, such as forestry (see Carron 1985; Dargavel 1995). Notwithstanding the importance of recent environmental histories as a corrective to the old world histories of environments and events, there is still a sense in many of these ‘new kinds of history’ (see Seddon 1994) of history unfolding against the backdrop of the physical environment or of geographical space as the stage upon which significant actions take place.

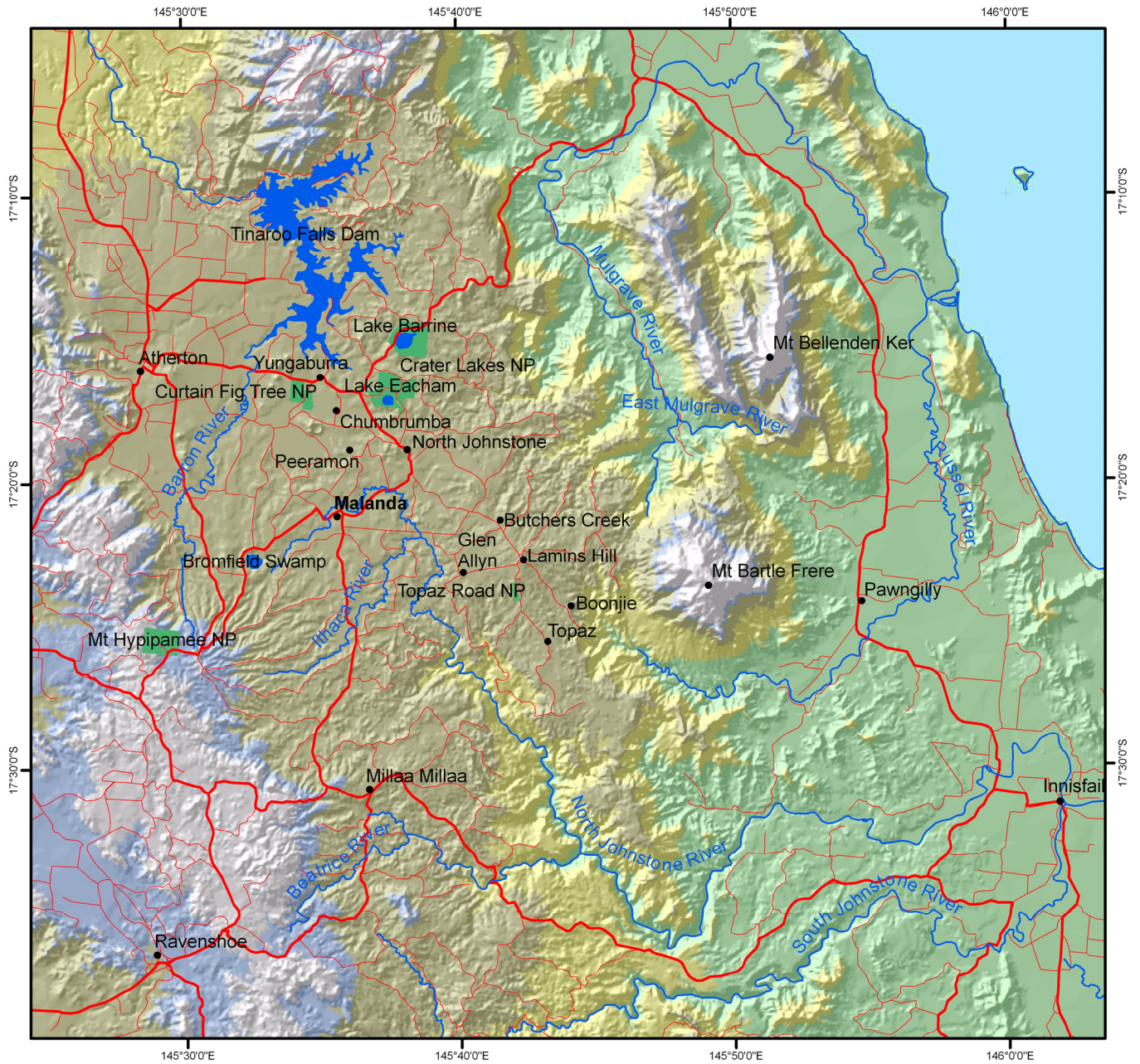
TOWARDS A HISTORY OF CULTURAL SPACES

In 'The Road to Botany Bay', the historian, Paul Carter, provides us with another way of looking at the spatial history of Australia. Carter's focus is upon 'cultural space' and not the 'geographer's space'. For him, spatial history "begins and ends in language" and it is this that makes it history and not geography (Carter 1987: xxii-xxiii). As Carter states, "we are well supplied with historical geographies, but these share the diorama mentality: they take it for granted that the newcomers travelled and settled a land which was already there" (ibid: xxi). In many respects, Carter's approach to the history of cultural space enables us to understand the invisibility or marginality of Aboriginal people, not only in 'imperial history' but also in so many environmental histories. As Carter points out, Aborigines were not physically invisible to the European settlers, but only incapable of being seen by the "selective blindness of a cultural discourse" (ibid: xx).

As the previous discussion suggests, this volume draws its inspiration from Paul Carter's work, *The Lie of the Land* (1996), and his many other works exploring the spatial history of Australia (see Carter 1987, 1992, 1999). Like Carter's volume, the title of this chapter labours with the idea of landscapes as "cultural networks of names, allusions, puns and coincidences" (Carter 1987: 7). The title also confronts the reader with darker possibilities, the 'lost surfaces' (Carter 1996: 6) concealed beneath colonial history and trampled upon in the process of transforming the rainforested uplands of North Queensland into a "passive planisphere" (ibid: 9). It is possible to recover these 'hidden histories' and challenge the 'lie of the land'. This volume takes the first steps towards this somewhat daunting task of rethinking the ground beneath our feet, the spaces in which we move, the places where we live. In bringing together Indigenous and settler spatial histories, my aim here is not just to replicate local experiences of confrontation and confoundedness. Rather, my intention here is to unsettle those comforting vistas, which seem to lie at the heart of contemporary facts and fantasies about Aboriginal and settler landscapes.

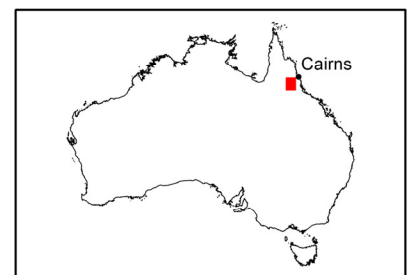
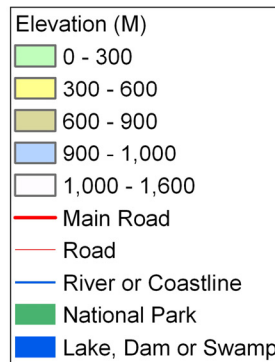
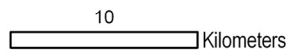
Throughout this volume, the stories, narratives, and anecdotes that I draw upon function less as illustrations and more, to paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt, as "disturbance[s] that require explanation, contextualisation and interpretation" (Greenblatt 1990: 5). The sources for these 'disturbing' accounts are varied. Like conventional history, I rely upon the written record to piece together the spatial history of settlement in the district of Malanda. These writings, as Paul Carter points out, are not about history *per se* but are in themselves historical enactments. A point also recognised by Theodore Adorno when he stated that, "history does not merely touch on language, but takes place in it" (Adorno 1978: 218). Settler accounts for this region date from 1885, with dairies and reports of gold-prospectors and government-backed explorers, and include the observations of pioneering families in the district, the celebratory compilations of local shire councils and historical societies, and a number of academic theses on European conquest and settlement. In all of these writings can be found varied references to 'the Aborigines'.

The descendants of these 'Aborigines' today refer to themselves, their culture, their language and their country as 'Ngadjon-Jii'. Ngadjon-Jii country includes the Tableland townships of Malanda, Yungaburra, Peeramon, Butchers Creek, Topaz, and Tarzali, and also extends east to encompass the highest peak in Queensland, Mt Bartle Frere (Map 1). Since 1910, most of Ngadjon-Jii country has been included within the local government boundaries of the Eacham Shire Council. European incursions into Ngadjon-Jii country date from Christie Palmerston's 1885 gold-prospecting expeditions from Herberton to the Barron Falls and, in 1886, from Innisfail (then known as Geraldton) up the Russell River to its headwaters. Permanent European settlement commenced in 1907, when land in the vicinity of Malanda was "opened up" for selection. What remained of the rainforested homelands of Ngadjon-Jii people has, since 1921, gradually been gazetted as national park or various kinds of reserves.



Rivers, Lakes, Roads and Localities supplied by AUSLIG (1996)
 Elevation supplied by Wet Tropics Management Authority (1996)
 National Parks based on Estate version 10.3 supplied by EPA (2004)
 Coastline derived from GEODATA 9 Second DEM Version 2.0 (2000)

This map was compiled and supplied by Trevor Parker CSIRO Tropical Forest Research Centre Atherton September 2005



Projection: Geographic
 Datum: GDA 1994
 Spheroid: GRS 1980
 Units: Degrees



Map 1: The Malanda District of the Atherton Tableland, North Queensland (Map: Trevor Parker, CSIRO Tropical Forest Research Centre Atherton).

In researching *Yamani Country*, I travelled with Ngadjon-Jii people through their traditional homelands, listening to and recording some of their stories of place and people. For Ngadjon-Jii people, their identity and their sense of locality is produced through and centres upon *talk* – the stories they tell themselves and each other in their day-to-day personal interactions. The importance of talking in place, about place, highlights the situated and contextual nature of Ngadjon-Jii conversations about country. As Daniel Vachon points out, country is a “place to face experience” (Vachon 2005). In aspiring to piece together a cross-cultural history of the region, I sat down with Ngadjon-Jii people, and together we examined and talked about the many texts and artefacts produced by settler society (photographs, testimonies, theories, and so on) regarding their lands, their culture and their ancestral heritage. Among the many comments generated during these discussions were Ngadjon-Jii people’s views on “the limits of white history” (Carter 1987: 349). These reflections, as well as my own, on the near absence of Aboriginal people in settler accounts are an integral element in the deconstruction and dialectics of this spatial history. The history of cultural spaces that follows is not intended to imitate the history that Ngadjon-Jii people tell themselves, rather it attempts to evoke their historical experience of these spaces.

The recollections, which are at the core of this volume create, articulate and, at times, manipulate what E. V. Daniel identifies as “epistemic and ontic realities” (Daniel 1990: 27). That is, they provide people with a way of ‘seeing and being’ in the world, and often effect significant transformations in this world. Liisa Malkki, writing of the ‘mythico-historical narratives’ of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, identifies this narrative process as ‘worldmaking’ and suggests that ‘making’ the world through narrative and narration is sometimes an oppositional process concerned with ‘remaking’ “the moral order of the world” and ‘recasting’ identity and history. Malkki not only highlights the constitutive role of narrative in the formation of identities, histories and ‘nation-ness’, but she also points to how narratives represent “vital form[s] of social action” (Malkki 1995: 105).

In what follows, I explore how these and other recollections are both constitutive of, and act to mediate, the social experience of space. In bringing together Ngadjon-Jii and settler recollections, I am also interested in how the very juxtaposition of dissimilar narratives can provide us with “new perceptions of the obvious” (Taussig 1992: 45). Finally, I also want to suggest here that the stories people tell themselves about themselves and about others can be viewed as more than just meta-social commentaries about events enacted elsewhere in space and time. I argue that these spatial stories have the power to both actualise and re-fashion events, social relations and categorical orders, in the process recalibrating contexts and meanings. In the following chapters, I examine how stories, as forms of social action, have both reflexive and very real consequences (cf Geertz 1973).