Channels of History

Isabel Turrago: 'Granny Brown' actually took over and reared Mary up as a young girl...she just said 'Well, Toppy, you're one of ours.' But the connection was both ways. One of the biggest roles that Aboriginal women have played in the pastoral industry, and it's not often talked about, is caring for the children.

The Channel Country is part of the Lake Eyre Basin. It is an area where very little rain falls, but which is fed by the water from three key rivers - the Georgina, the Diamantina, and Cooper Creek. Because the land is extremely flat, when water comes the rivers break their banks and form a network of 'braided channels'. In flood time a single river can come to be up to seventy miles across. This area has been vital to humans for thousands of years. It was:

- A key trade route and land of plenty for Aboriginal people, especially associated with the punt trade.
- In the path of explorers such as Burke and Wills, McKinlay and Hodgkinson.
- The foundation of huge squattting fortunes such as the Durack family's - who used the Georgina River as a road through to the Kimberley.
- An area the size of Victoria with a population of approximately 1500
- A key pastoral region, often described as the 'richest cattle fattening country in the world', at least when the channels are running.

Beth Sear: The Art School in South Australia closed down in 1933. I ended up taking this job - run a government station at Cofferall Hill. I pastured Cofferall Hill at a lovely cattle station with sheep and cattle and beautiful everything else, but Cofferall Hill was built up of galvanised iron on the top of shifting sand.

Channels of History brings together both contemporary and historical stories about the range of ways that women have participated in the Channel Country: as traditional owners, landholders, brides, drovers, cooks, mothers, publicans, post office proprietors, governesses, teachers and writers. It is about patterns of land and land use and the patterns of women's lives; about tall tales and hidden histories and the functions these various stories fulfill.

Channels of History is also about history. Many women have written about their life in the Channel Country. Who makes particular histories and what is the connection between a historian and the stories they choose to tell? How do race and gender and personal circumstances influence the perspective from which a history is seen? Why does it matter which histories we know and which are forgotten?
This exhibition and its underlying stories in some way began with my mother, a woman who made her adult life in a rural area and whose feeling for the land left a deep impression on me, and a desire to remember her life and the lives of other rural women. But my mother never to my knowledge went to the Channel Country. It was Pam Watson's wonderful book, 'Fruitier Lands and Pioneer Legends: How the Karuwall Lost Their Land' (Hale and Iremonger, 1998) that brought me to this place, its physical contours and its women's stories.

I found no definitive history of the Channel Country, but lots of accounts of life there, very many of them by women. The oral histories underlying this project add to that chorus of voices. These stories confirm and contradict and intersect with each other, and reminded me of the braided channels of the Channel Country landscape. In turn, each woman's hands were marked by her relationship to the land. We used these ideas in developing the 'look' of both this overall exhibition and the touch screen interactive documentary that is at its heart.

This project has fed my intellect, spirit and imagination for several years now. It would never have happened without colleagues and sponsors. Please see the exhibition itself for the full list of thank yous and credits. My key collaborators were: Georgina Greenhill - exhibition designer and component artist; Julie Hornsey & Erica Addis - camera and photography; David Huggett - documentary editing; Jonathan Richards and Andrew Walker - archival and pictorial research; Tadhg Hickey - interactive authoring and panel production and, Gary Reilly - life support. And of course none of it would have been possible without the generosity of all the women who agreed to have fragments of their life stories shared with you, the public. Enjoy!

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Pamphlet Design: Tani Budini

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