

of Science for Young Scientists, and the Northern Territory History Awards. Thanks are also due to Philippa Webb and Jinki Trevillian for reading the manuscript and making a number of helpful suggestions.

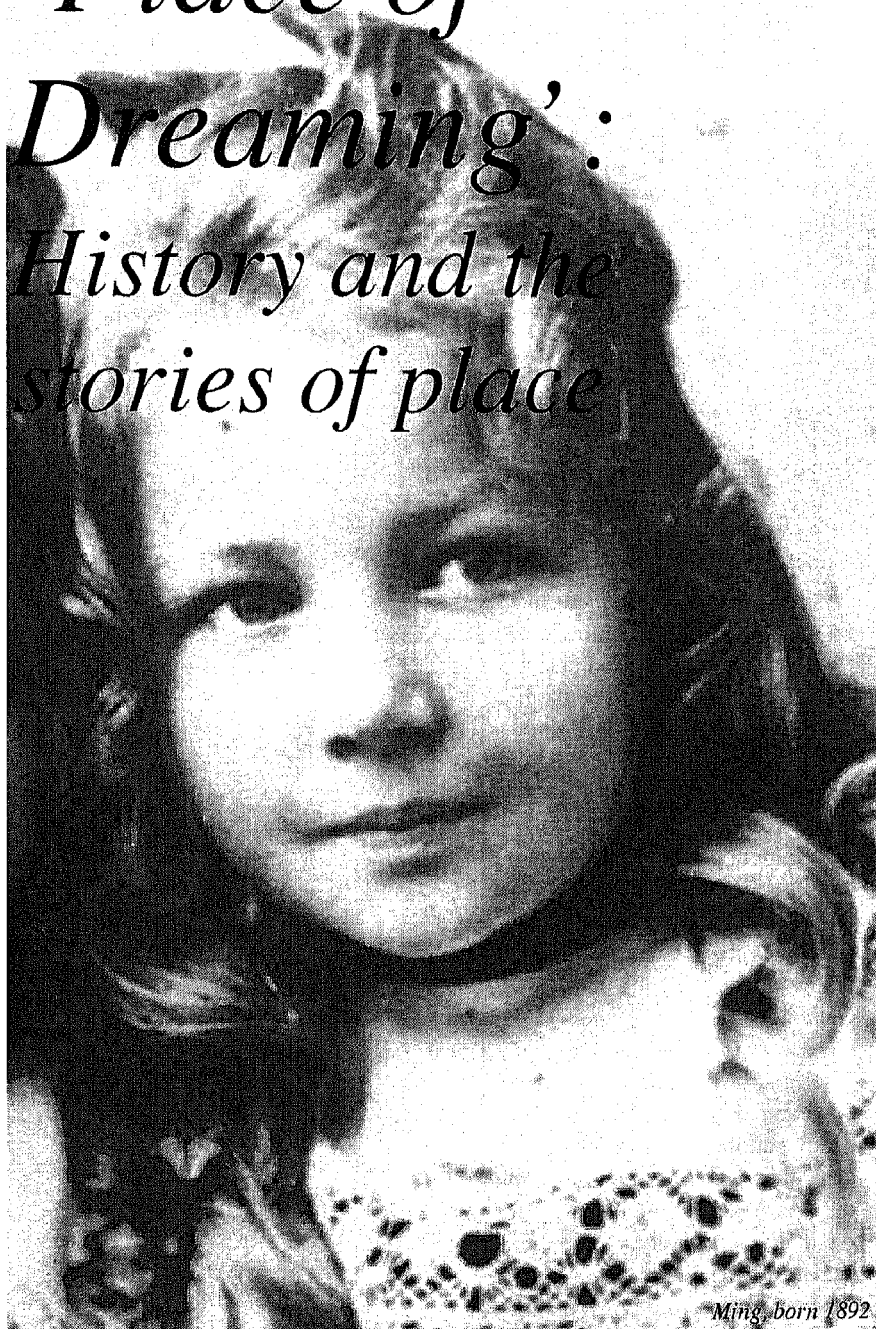
Notes

- 1 Greg Denning, *Performances*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p.72.
- 2 Minoru Hokari, *Cross-Culturalizing History: Journey to the Gurindji Way of Historical Practice*, PhD thesis, ANU, Canberra, 2001.
- 3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p.97. Chakrabarty argues this point in the context of 'minorities history' but I believe it is the case of 'local history' as well.
- 4 See, for example, Deborah Bird Rose, 'Saga of Captain Cook: Morality in Aboriginal and European Law', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No 2, 1984, pp.24-39.
- 5 For more detailed analysis of this story, see, Minoru Hokari, 'Images of Colonialism: Interpretation of Colonial Landscape by an Aboriginal Historian', Alan Barnard, Henry Stewart, and Keiichi Omura eds. *Self - and Other Images of Hunter-Gatherers*, Senri Ethnological Studies, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 2002 (forthcoming).
- 6 Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*, Australian Heritage Commission, Canberra, 1996, p.32.
- 7 I owe this concept of 'fragmentary' to Dipesh Chakrabarty. See his 'Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism: Some Recent Critique of Subaltern Studies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, No 8, 1995.

Victoria Haskins is a lecturer in history at Flinders University of South Australia, her areas of interest including historical relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, intermarriage, and Aboriginal domestic service and child removal policies, Australian history generally, and museum studies. Prior to her appointment Victoria worked as curator of Australian Social History at the National Museum of Australia, and as a researcher at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU. She holds a PhD in history from the University of Sydney.

Contemporary images: Joan Fenton.

Merriwinga, 'Place of Dreaming': History and the stories of place



Ming, born 1892

VICTORIA HASKINS

Aged 6 years – Merriwinga, Tilba Tilba, South Coast and what a little paradise! Mountain, Lake & Sea. A gentle, undulating land rolling softly to the beach on one hand the Lake & Lagoon on the other, & the sweet smelling Earth, the bracken & old leaf mould, the tea-tree & the moss & violets. How I loved your shady coolness, the little chirping voices of tiny unseen animals, the great stillness, the longing to fall upon my face & cling

tightly to this friendly spirit, nothing could harm me here, it was a sanctuary. Had not my old and dear friend Merriman last King of a dying tribe brought me here & told me so. Had he not shown me each tiny flower & leaf, every rock & tree within miles & taught me many of their beautiful native names. I loved to listen to his soft old crooning voice as hand in hand we wandered on. Sometimes we would stop to have the life & habits of a

small tortoise explained carefully to me – how it laid fat little white eggs in a cosy hole in the bank of the Lagoon. How good to eat & how before rain or a storm they all came out & wandered about..

Joan Kingsley-Strack, undated, c1930s

When I was a little girl, my great-grandmother Ming had always been a little old lady.

Born in 1892, she was 75 years old when I was born, a fragile birdlike creature. My memories of her were of her thin fluffy hair, watery eyes, the soft, papery skin of her trembling hands. I remember asking, when I was quite young, why we all called her 'Ming' and being told no-one was exactly certain, but it was presumed a baby-talk name, given her by my father. Apart from this singular aspect of curiosity, I knew nothing about her life. Genteel and faded, like the pastel-painted china gathering dust in the gloom of her flat, she was from another world, another time.

Years after she'd gone, I discovered a number of startling details about Ming's life. A well-to-do Sydney matron, she had employed, as servants, a succession of four Aboriginal girls taken from their families under a harsh government policy. As a direct consequence of her experiences with these unhappy young women, she had become an outspoken opponent of that policy we call now the 'Stolen Generations'. By 1938 she was the secretary of a group called the Aboriginal Citizenship Committee, that campaigned for Aboriginal rights and the abolition of government control in support of the Aboriginal-only Aborigines Progressive Association. I found out also that Ming herself attributed her keenness to see 'justice' for the Aboriginal people to her childhood contacts with the Yuin people of Wallaga Lake, on the South Coast of NSW, especially the elder 'King Merriman', of whom she wrote lengthy and sentimental reminiscences.

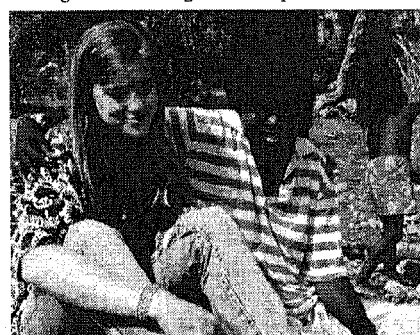
Ming's recollections included about twenty separate 'legends' Merriman told her. To my modern ear, these stories with their princesses and flowers that turned into birds were saturated with a cloying colonialist nostalgia, for a world that never was, of grateful natives and kindly pioneers. Her grandparents she constructed



Two Aboriginal men near a tree. Merriman on the right is wearing a breast plate

consistently as benevolent and caring towards the Yuin, claiming her grandmother 'mothered nursed & cared for... these ill-treated people' and had even come up to Sydney on 'several occasions... simply to demand justice' for them. The specific story she used to explain her own determination to fight for the Aboriginal cause was particularly disturbing in its stereotypical image of the 'weeping elder'. She recalled sitting by the lake with Merriman on a large rock and seeing a tear run down his cheek. 'We were better *dead* my people,' Ming claims he said. 'My heart stood still... I dared not ask the reason, but I vowed I would help his people what *ever* it was...'

But her stories did solve that



Vicky (left) and Sophie

longstanding puzzle over her name – it seemed she had reinstated the name Merriman called her as a child, 'Mingi', or 'little woman'. Ming's widowed grandmother's property, which she visited regularly with her mother, was, I found out, located adjacent to the Yuin reserve; and it turned out that 'King Merriman' was



Mary and Narelle

indeed a recognised leader of his community during her early childhood. His memory is honoured by the Yuin community at Wallaga Lake today, both in the name of their Land Council (Merriman's Land Council) and in the name of their cultural centre (Umbarra – this being Merriman's Aboriginal name). It seemed that there may be something in the stories after all – at the very least I thought the cultural centre might be able to advise me. When I contacted the Umbarra Cultural Centre, to ask if I could send them copies for their comment, Lorraine, who was part of the husband and wife team running the centre, immediately invited me to come down

to Wallaga Lake and meet them personally.

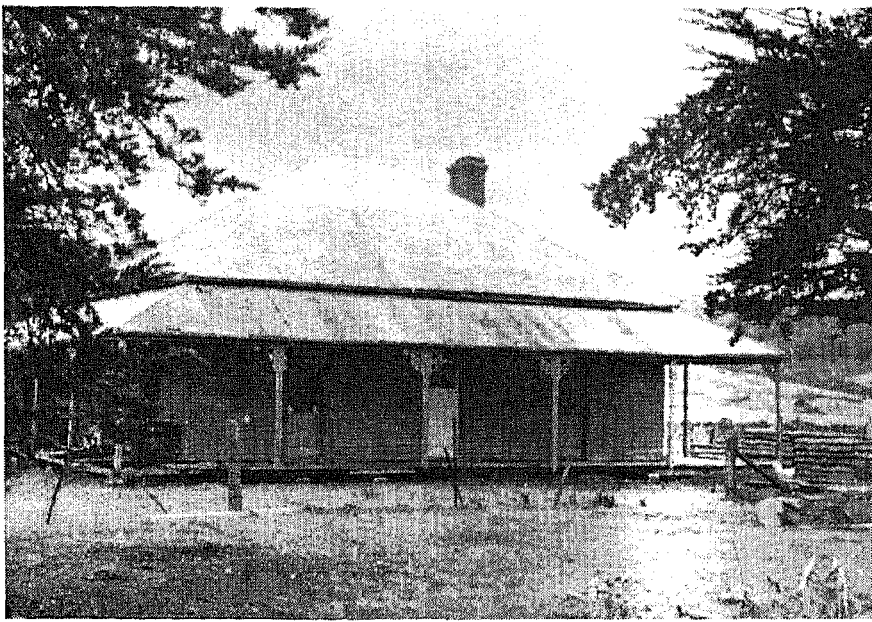
It was during this visit that I came to understand the importance of place in our shared histories, and its significance to the historian of Indigenous and settler relationships. For the purposes of my history postgraduate thesis, I was focusing on the importance of Ming's relationships with her domestic workers as a catalyst for her activism; her class and gender position and the impact of this on her views on Aboriginal rights. Tales of her Wallaga Lake childhood were a romantic aside to the main work, an affectation – at any rate, a distraction from the 'real' history I could now

build my thesis around. But what I learnt about the connections between history and place during my brief stay at Wallaga Lake has had the more profound impact. It transformed the way I saw my role as a historian, which in turn transformed the process of my research, realising my direct obligations to engage with communities in their own place, in the present. But let me begin at the beginning.

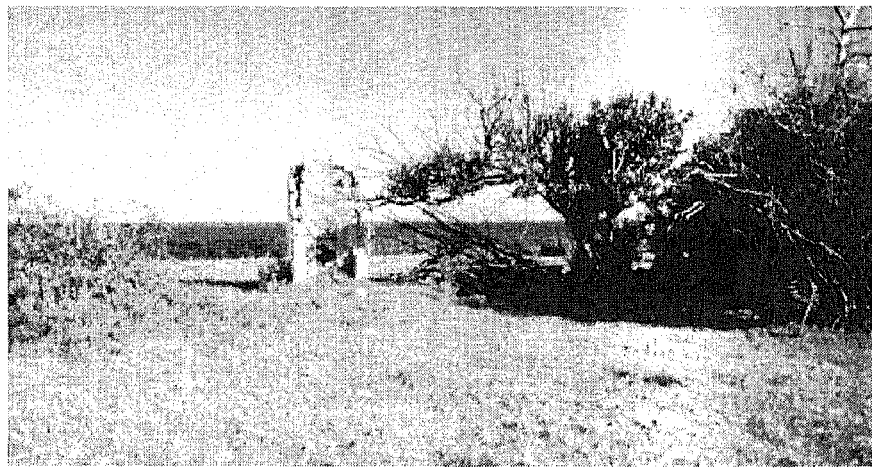
When I set out to research a history of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, my impulse arose from personal experience. My own childhood was spent in the east Kimberley of north-west Australia, our family one of the few non-Aboriginal families, before my father was transferred to Sydney when I was twelve. Ever since, I'd been hungry to hear the Aboriginal side of Australian stories, so glaringly absent from everything around me since our move. Why were Aboriginal people seemingly gone from the south-eastern swathe of the continent? What had happened here in our past? What bound our shared existence, and how had Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people struggled to deal with the finding themselves alongside each other? And, as I became more politically aware, and, while at university, began meeting Kooris in Sydney, were we to be locked into racial injustice and conflict forever?

When a scholarship allowed me to embark on such a project in the early 1990s, I was suddenly plunged into the whole argument that non-Aboriginal academics were only perpetuating colonialism by writing about Aboriginal people's history. How could I, a victor, write a history of race relations that was in any way valid? Already convinced by the postmodernist premise that discourse shapes reality (or at least our recognition of it) I took the escape route chosen by many others in my position. But attempts to twist my thesis topic into a sophisticated discussion of representations of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women only compounded my sense of futility.

Looking for some kind of inspiration, or legitimisation, I returned to my old home town Kununurra, in the company of my old best friend, Sophie, then living at Borroloola. But here I felt a



Merriwina in the 1970s



Remnant chimney, Merriwina homestead, 1993



Tor (standing stone) on Gulaga Mountain

profound sense of alienation. Sophie's unexpected impatience when some Aboriginal people visiting from Wave Hill told me a creation story of the country round Top Dam – *her* country, which they had no right to tell –

brought home to me my uncomfortable position. As a *kartiya* (non-Aboriginal person, literally one who cannot hear) and an outsider, in a place I had long treasured as my own, my problem was clarified rather than resolved. Without

the right/ability to hear, let alone to tell, my research was only a mirage reflecting a meaningless world. Back in Sydney, my sense of unreality about the whole project intensified. It was at this point that my auntie Mel asked me if I would mind her house and market-stall bookshop for her – and so I threw it in and set off to the far North Coast of New South Wales.

Now I was staying in my auntie's house, not far from where my Gran lives. Not really a local, not really a tourist, I had roots here of a sort (a huge and shady tree in my Gran's yard had been planted on the day of my birth, and bore a plaque dedicated to my grandfather, whose ashes were scattered beneath it). When Gran asked me if I might do some family history for her, I half-heartedly agreed. I did not consider this 'real history', but being such a failure as a 'real historian', this despised pursuit seemed appropriate enough for me.

Trying to spark some enthusiasm, Gran showed me some of her old photographs. One of them, showing an Aboriginal nursemaid with a shy smile embracing my gran, a fair-haired toddler, immediately caught my attention. It turned out that Mary* ('more than my own mother to me' said Gran) had worked for Ming for many years. Not only that, but Gran told me there were others who followed her. Gran had no idea how or why they came to be there.

Having no idea myself, nor that either she or Ming had ever had anything ever to do with Aboriginal people, I was taken aback by this photograph. Seeing my interest Gran suggested I might look into the old boxes Ming had left behind her, lying dusty and unopened in my auntie's garage for ten years. So I did, but only in the vague hope that I might uncover some more such images (just in case I returned to my project on representations). But I found much, much more than I could have dreamed of, including a detailed expose of a government policy about which most non-Aboriginal Australians had known nothing at all.

And so, I found myself in the first instance on the doorstep of Lorraine's house in the Wallaga Lake village, with a bundle of photocopied legends under my arms. I had turned up absent-mindedly on 26 January long weekend, 'Invasion Day', and found all the

backpackers' lodges and motels filled up. Thankfully, Lorraine welcomed me into her home and invited me to stay with her family as long as I needed.

Wallaga Lake Community Village is at the same place as the old Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Station, which was originally the Yuin camp. At the time the white settlers began setting up their townships, the Yuin made their camp in a beautiful area of bushland overlooking the vast and tranquil Wallaga Lake, Bermagui coastline to the east, the mountain Gulaga (named 'Mt Dromadery' by James Cook in 1770) looming westwards. This was opposite the land selected by Ming's grandfather in the 1860s, a flat expanse of clearing which was a traditional ceremonial ground. According to Ming, the property's name 'Merriwanga' meant 'Place of Dreaming'.

I spent the next week talking and walking all around the area in the company of Yuin and non-Aboriginal people, trying to find the traces of Ming and her stories. Lorraine's sister took me through the bush and told me about the Doolagarl, the little hairy men who inhabit it. As we sat listening to the wind rustling through the tall gums, I could feel the back of my neck prickle. We lay on the warm sand at Bermagui beach and ate fish and chips and talked about hidden histories and the places we'd been. Later, the proprietor of the local history museum showed me my family tree and took me out to the site of Ming's grandmother's old house (nothing remained save an ancient, gnarled stump of a rose bush, and a brick chimney). They both pointed out to me the subdivision of land somehow inexplicably carved off the old reserve and sold off in the 1960s; there was some murky connection with the old Merriwanga property, a dodgy exchange of land perhaps.

I visited the homestead of one of the founding pioneers of the district (he'd both selected the land for Ming's grandfather and had the Aboriginal camp gazetted as the first government-run reserve in the state in 1891). His descendants showed me around and in their old shop's ledger pointed out the entries made by Ming's grandmother and some of the Yuin she paid in store goods for services. The town's foremost local historian told me all sorts of unexpected yarns and

anecdotes about my ancestors over coffee. My esteemed great-great-grandfather 'JT' Hobbes, turned out to be known as something of a fool in his own time. One of a number of disasters that afflicted his enterprise, the burning of an entire tobacco crop and the barns and adjoining buildings, had occurred after one of his sons had fired on a flock of black ducks (Umbarra's totem!). I found out that Ming's grandfather and his pioneer friend had ended up, it seemed, in some argument over JT's attempt to lease, then to turn portion of the Aboriginal reserve into a commons, the township dividing over it. Back at Wallaga Lake village I attended a funeral, and there heard about the unknown grave of Umbarra, and his wife's huge funeral in the late nineteenth century. Later Lorraine's sister and husband took me on a visit up high onto the mountain Gulaga. From high up amongst the waving trees and huge, silent standing tors I could see the places Ming wrote about, and hear the story of Gulaga and her sons from my Yuin guides. Every night I came back to Lorraine's welcoming house with my head crammed full of visions and stories.

Lorraine brought out the manuscript of a book she and others were preparing, based on oral histories and local archives, for teaching their children their history. Here I learnt that not only was the community hard hit indeed by the child removal policy but that the Wallaga Lake people had been suffering since the very start of the government gazettal of their camp. The very first report of the new manager warned of mutiny, recording that the men of the community were now under the (not mistaken) impression that their future was to be 'all work and no pay, other than food, and no liberty'. The stories Ming recorded of Aboriginal ceremonies for new babies were given poignancy when I read in Lorraine's manuscript of how the managers 'stopped our culture cold', the last initiation ceremonies taking place in the 1920s, and the speaking of Aboriginal languages strictly proscribed. How amazing then that Umbarra should have chosen to educate a little white girl in his people's language and lore.

Despite the obvious good relationships between the present-day Yuin and the non-Aboriginal

townspeople, there were clear differences in their understandings of the past, and there were differences even between individuals, in the histories I was told. Realising this, my anxieties over the fancifulness of Ming's legends evaporated. Stories merged, converged, conflicted, dovetailed, slid between each other. There were the occasional outright denials and contradictions, but more often, simply many different angles and facets of the same thing, a shimmering interweaving of past lives and memories that was connected only by what seemed, essentially, to be a relationship to the place. The stories I had brought down with me, Ming's memories of Umbarra that I had so awkwardly proffered to the Yuin, contained a core reality, which was a historically embedded connection between Yuin, settler and place. Peeling back the layers of sentimentality, the tones and tropes that jar our 'postcolonial' sensibilities so, underlying the stories was the message I finally heard. It is not 'belonging' to place that brings its history alive, but the relationships and responsibilities created between people in a place, the dynamics of welcoming, exchanging, listening and teaching. It was the stories Ming heard and the process of her retelling them, me returning them, the new-old stories I could now hear in return, that made history alive in the present, and it was the place that held the stories, a place where 'the mountain calls you back'.

Acknowledgments

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Sources

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Umbarra Cultural Centre, *History of Wallaga Lake & the Yuin People*, unpublished manuscript, Umbarra Cultural Centre, Wallaga Lake (1993).

*Not her real name – throughout my research I have changed the names of the four women who worked for Ming, to protect the privacy of their descendants.