

Lake Eyre

Lesley Williams¹

Sea

Matthew Flinders, in 1801, at the top of Spencer Gulf, hopes for a sea passage north, climbs out of *Investigator*, into a rowboat. Who is watching, as he passes by? Down at the foot of the mountain ranges, the sea channel narrows to the trickle of a stream. Oars touch bottom.

But had this been a passage through to north, had it been a year of rain, imagine his joy, at a sea where he had determined one to be, imagine his frustration at its shallow depths.

Now, in years when it really rains, people can come in from the north, down the Warburton Creek, in catamarans or dinghies, and negotiate a passage through Lake Eyre, north to south. But they always, eventually, reach the confines of its shores.

Flight

Here is our plane, small, moth-like, a single-engine Cessna. It balances on wide-strutted wheels, propeller on its nose, wings above a windowed cabin, tail extended, at rest.

We are about to trust our lives to this tiny thing?

I sit behind the pilot.

His head, the back of his neck, his way of speaking, broad, laconic, not heard so often these days.

The runway waits, its pale, stony surface is tucked in along the base of dark hills, at the eastern edge of the Gammon Ranges.

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The runway shrinks beneath the engine's roar.

And we are flying west, high into afternoon.

Déjà vu: though I never sat behind my father in a plane. For the rest of his life his 'wings' lay silent, shut away inside a box, coming out on Anzac day, worn, along with his medals, with some defiance, sorrow, and regret. Expected, as eldest son, to return to the family business. Expecting a child. Expected to keep his feet most firmly on the ground.

Flying over mountain peaks. Mt Painter lifts itself above the rest, to look back toward morning, back across Lake Frome, a wide haze of salt air rising.

The sky is clear and blue. At five thousand feet the plane levels out.

Gammon Ranges, left behind, Lake Frome a streak of white across the eastern horizon. Below, a riverbed of sand and trees flows down from the high hills.

Below, land sinks into waves and crests, bare, wind blown, weathered to ochres and browns: station country, etched in dry water-lines, mottled by rock, crossed by the doodling meanders of a river channel. Long straight roads with corners at arbitrary places cross the land, and plumes of dust rise from the moving dots of four-wheel-drives.

The land appears pressed down upon, and smoothed.

Northwest we fly, ears encased in headphones. To add to the air-bound, enclosed, and noisy unreality, the pilot has a gossipy chat about lunch, and his lack of it, with the pilot of a jet, flying north, high above.

Below, desiccated lakes dot the earth, dry creeks wander, braided channels etch a flood plain that drains to the crystal white of a broad saltpan.

Below, antiquity and ancestors, bare earth-skin, with bones of rock, protruding.

Long bush-dotted dunes appear. The Tirari desert ripples across the land, dun coloured, with tinges of ochre and pink brushing at its wind-blown edges.

On the horizon, a shining begins.

It is water, so bright that the edge of the earth becomes a shimmering flare of light and air.

Remember the fairy-tale? A princess with a golden orb: bouncing, shining, filling the day with delight? Wasn't she also about to meet a frog? Who wanted to be kissed?

The plane flies low, across the lake shore, and water spreads out beneath our wings, across the lake bed rippling just below; flat pink water, long arcs and waves impressed in salt across its still surface.

The horizon curves at the edge of the earth, a sheath of light, that parts the two wide swathes of blue, deepens to pink, and fashions salt-streaks into jagged spears.

Below, there's a plane in the lake. A broken plane, its wings well and truly waterlogged, is stranded in shallow water, not far from the eastern shore. Our pilot is nonchalant. *Pilot embarrassed, flew a bit low, a few bruises only*, he said. But the plane is dead, and in the lake to stay.

Ahead, through the flash of sun, water and sky become one.

Completely possible to head into the wrong stretch of blue, like a Celtic boat drifting through a mythological haze of sky, or a plane in a lake not quite knowing why.

The pilot, unfazed, keeps us in the air, the horizon returns, the shoreline recedes. Way out over the water, the plane banks, turns, to wing above bird-roosts and hover over black-backed pelicans, etched on muddy water in a vee, flying south. Sharp cliffs, scooped and sculpted, meet with tree-dotted mud-shelves to define the water's edge. The lake tapers in, and funnels water into the southern lake; this lake is small and well defined, curving, tucking in beneath the rim of the northern lake. A swift glance back to the north; the sun is sinking slowly through the sky, the water spreads out deeply blue, and we are gone.

Salt

One afternoon. That is all the time it takes, to see Lake Eyre filled with water.

Has *Tiddalick the Frog* been laughing? Is this his country? Is this lake one echo of his laugh? I can see him, hear him, laughing to make life, to make a lake, its water sparkling in pure sunshine.

Though even dry, encrusted with salt, to human eyes not living, on clear sun-filled days the lake will sparkle.

In lake after lake after lake, South Australia is salted by sun.

On the map the inland lakes are often shown in blue, as wish-filled a thought as ever held by Matthew Flinders and his crew as they rowed toward the inland sea. Edward Eyre, on horseback, forty years later, thought these lakes of salt might stretch, one huge continuous curve, to form a barrier, uncrossable. But as he rode through the country, looking out from hilltops and mountain ranges, he discovered some of their edges, some of the ways through, and came once to the southern-most edge of the lake that bears his name.

Stand at the edge of Lake Hart, or Island Lake, or Lake Torrens, look out from the Gammon Ranges toward Lake Frome; drive past, around, even across, salt pans in the Simpson Desert, fly over small rounded pans that dot the land as though painted on its surface; look at images of Lake Gairdner taken from a plane; the land crystallises, and past seas rise.

They are to my eyes as they are.

Separate, silent. The long gaze to far horizons offers no resistance as the air of their breathing skips, dances, whirls across surfaces of skin. Traces white space into memory.

Water

Lake Eyre fills with water, a wide and salty sea.

Was the lake's "dead heart" waiting?² Can a dead heart beat?

Was its heart not dead at all, but beating, strong, snug in its hidden sheath of mud?

Was it sleeping? Waiting for the signal breath of atmospheric wind; dependent on the change of tide direction up against Peru, Pacific winds that rise, the rush of air that gathers strength from Himalayan slopes, the gathering of energy in cyclones raging equatorially between the land and sea, and the hot climatic wash of monsoon rains.

2 Much of Australia's central lands used to be called the 'dead heart'. It's a term not so often used now, as language around the deserts begins to take on different perspectives: used here after R. Dulhunty, *When the Dead Heart beats, Lake Eyre Lives*.

Does the lake lie, longing for this moment, filled with expectation, dreaming? In its deep, dark mud, in the crunch of its crystal, in hidden, dormant seed and spawn, in lizard's track, bird's eye, creek sand, wind's breath? In wrinkled, shingled terraces and shores that dream past lives? Does it hear the sound of water as it passes underground, as it springs, puddles, spills, gushes, in bore and mound-spring overflows nearby: and feeder-creeks and waterways that taunt its salty face with occasional damp trickles, that melt its heart with rivulets of tears?

Land

Lake Eyre: lowest point on the continent: lowest point, 15 metres below sea level: lowest point in a drainage basin one-sixth the size of the whole country. 1.17 million square kilometres of earth, crossing the arbitrary boundaries of four states. The sedimentary basin in which it lies, the Lake Eyre Basin, was formed up to 65 million years ago, overlying, overlapping, basins of even greater antiquity.

Layer upon layer, some still peeking through to see what the earth will do, ancestors in rock and sand, waters, winds and ancient seas; in opals, oils and gases, coal and uranium, silver and gold; following fault-lines, moving places, changing faces; rejuvenations and reincarnations.

Humans are less than two million years old. Humans, on this land, might have been here, perhaps, one twentieth of this span.

This land, long, long ago, once upon a time, was a land of freshwater, floodplain and swamp; a shallow sea rose and covered it, 115 million years ago; then crept away, and the land sank back to a land of rivers and lakes; and then it was folded and flattened, and laid out to bake, and to dry. This lake is a fault-lined lowering, a hollow, spanned, scoured and flattened by new waves of wind and water. Once upon a time, 40,000 or so years ago, it was a freshwater lake much larger than now, when its present dark eastern coastal cliffs, muddy water at their feet, were formed by the laying down of silt; and left, by time, to crystallise in salt.

It didn't take long for explorers, two hundred years ago, to cross the continent. Why would it have taken any longer for the Ancestors, their pioneers and explorers, 40-60,00 years ago, eager to find sustenance and good places to live? Eager to tell the stories of how their land was made.

Lake

This is a lake that sinks below the level of the sea. This is a lake that dreams its beginnings out of the welling of time, out of the skin of a kangaroo, thrown to the ground by the wangkangurru man who, with his dogs, had hunted it all around the country.

A resurrection story.

The Kangaroo, dead once, rose out of the cooking fire and ran again, to be chased again by the man and his dingo dogs, who hunted and caught, and finally ate him.

“He put the skin and the lake came up. That’s where it is. There’s a spring there. Well that’s where he chucked it in, threw that skin. And it’s there, that Dreaming, sitting right down in the middle of the lake ... That man had no name. He was a black man. It was bush country one time. I don’t know what happened after he put down the skin.”³

Though not the only story I know, of the Dingo and the Old Man Kangaroo.

Not always was the Kangaroo as now we do behold him ... he was grey and woolly and his pride was inordinate ... up jumped Dingo, Yellow-Dog Dingo, always hungry, dusty in the sunshine. Off went the proud Kangaroo⁴

This is a lake that dreams its beginnings through a land that moves through time. Time flows into it, around it, through it, from far to the north and east and south and west of it. Languages, words, names and places, tell its life-story. Wind, water, people and other creatures tell its life-story.

Country

These are the names, of peoples who lived, Yarluyandi, Garangura, Wankangurru, Arabana. Gugada, Guyani. Dhirari, Adnyamadha, Biladaba, Malyangaba, Yarli, Wafigali. Yandruwandha, Diyari,

3 This story is told by T. O’Donohue in B. Shaw (1995), *Our Heart is the Land. Aboriginal Reminiscences from the Western Lake Eyre Basin*, Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra, p. 35.

4 R. Kipling (1976), *Just So Stories*. Book Club Associates, London, pp. 85-97.

Yarawarga, Ngamini, *anti-clockwise round a map*,⁵ on the lands around the lake.

Descendants? Some are still there, living not too far from Lake Eyre.

*Below this map of names hides another map, deep in the heart of the South Australian Museum, traced on silk. Echoes of its being are etched upon glass, displayed as the past, filled with place-names, accurate or not, but the point is, filled, all spaces taken, not a trace of nullius in sight.*⁶

And the lake is written in as *Katitanta*.

Maps and Mapping

Why do we need maps?

Maps to follow, maps with lines.

Before, in this place, beneath this time and space, maps were not drawn, except perhaps in sand, or scratched in rock. Stories, words or signs were told to form maps of the mind.

Maps of movement, maps of spaces.

Maps that live into the future, beyond the ancestors, can be glimpsed in paintings that dream land, and people, and ways, painted by descendants whose feet and hands, eyes and hearts still come through old ways of living.

Maps of consciousness.

Maps that form out of the movement of people, swept; like the wind that swept the land, into deep overlapping basins, leaving rock and sand out to dry along the margins of the sky; like the water that flows beneath the land, leading people on, as it rises to the surface, dotted along the shores of its long journey through time.

5 Map in B. Shaw, *Op Cit*.

6 This is the Hillier Map, discussed by P. Jones (2002), "Naming the Dead Heart" in L. Hercus, F. Hodges, J. Simpson (eds), *The Land is a Map*. Pandanus Books, Canberra. A Facsimile of part of this map, on glass, is on display in the South Australian Museum.

Butterfly wings

This is what I seem to know.⁷

That the fillings of Lake Eyre are demonstrably but not only related to the monsoon patterns of weather and summer rain. That monsoons are not only a surface pattern, but are connected to high planetary patterns of wind and climate. That physical barriers like the Himalayas are part of that pattern, providing thermal uplift. That El Nino, the Southern Oscillation Index and the Walker Circulation patterns are also involved. That the large landmass of Australia, with no barriers and dry spaces, is probably connected, in ways not yet understood, to the movement and pattern of monsoon circulation.

That the historical notion that Lake Eyre never filled in the past is a wrong one. That long-past Lake Eyre fillings are connected to Quaternary patterns of climate change detected in core samples from other lakes, for instance, Lake Frome.

Seeing and verifying, whitefella-scientific style, only began in the 20th century; the lake's filling only fully verified in the 1949-50 filling⁸; only fifty years ago, less than one lifetime.⁹

Late Quaternary¹⁰: the last Glacial Maximum, 16,000-18,000 years BP, earth temperature average 4.5°C lower than present, though no ice here: the Holocene Optimum, 7,000-9,000 years BP, earth temperature average 2°C higher than present.¹¹ Aboriginal people have lived through here at least during the last earth-cycle of freezing and warming.

Flying

Away.

We cross more desert dunes, fly across ochred, tree-dotted rises that fall away steeply. The dunes run south to north, low, spare in vegetation, with wide interdune swales. I am thrilled by the mere fact of their existence, seen before only as dense lines on a map. Thrilled by the fact that I am gazing down on them,

7 R. J. Allan (1985), *The Australian Summer Monsoon, Teleconnections, and Flooding in the Lake Eyre Basin*, Royal Geographical Society of Australia.

8 See C. Warren Bonython (1955), "The Filling and Drying-Up" in *Lake Eyre, South Australia. The Great Flooding of 1949-50*, Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, SA, p. 33.

9 R. J. Allan, *Op Cit.*, p. 36

10 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

11 Information on average temperatures gained from www.geopubs.co.uk.

flying over them; no idea that in just over a year I will be down there, a bit further to the north, crossing the Simpson Desert.

We fly on, back to the brown ridges, run-off slopes and creek-defined outposts of low hills, high ranges their backdrop as afternoon shadows fall, steep and dark.

The cabin is silent, everyone hungry, and filled.

Fly over the ranges, on toward Mt Painter, in over the red hills of Gammon.

Rock outcrops and ridges clear and sharp against the deepening sky. In one delirious movement, the plane banks and swoops like a bird, down through a valley, earth far below, the valley-sides a canyon of rock-faces, mottled, grey with age, pink where rock falls have cut chunks and swathes, clad with trees tucked into crevices. Up, out and over we soar, and we are landed, breathless, already trusting to memory.