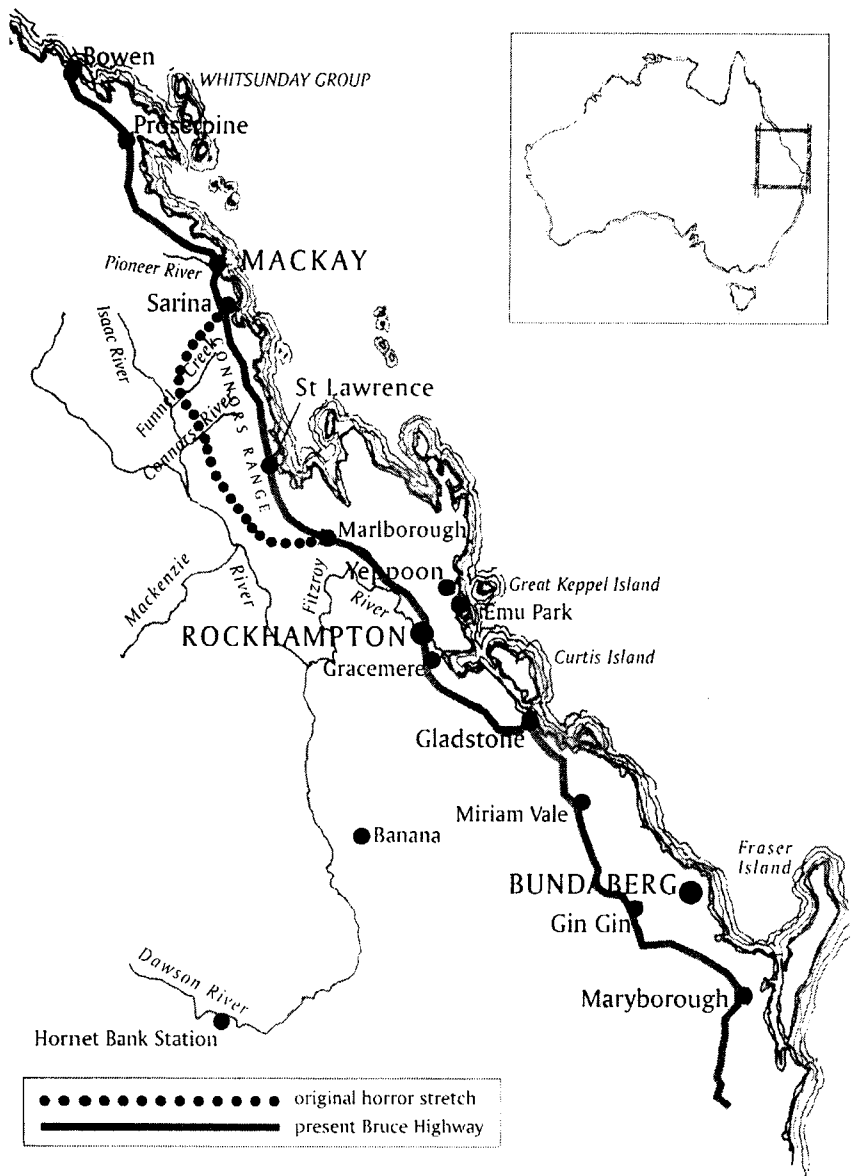


ross gibson

SEVEN
VERSIONS
of an

'haunted by fear and tragedy, this stretch of country is an immense, historical crime scene...
old passions and violent secrets are lying around in a million clues and traces'

UQP



A Beginning

Do you know the Central Queensland hinterland, the brigalow country that spooks in around when you cross the Tropic of Capricorn and travel north out of Rockhampton to the canefields of Mackay? A vast and sparse section of Australia's Pacific coast, the Capricorn country is known in popular legend as 'the Horror Stretch' — a place you're warned not to go.

Let's say you're driving there. Feeling like an alien, you skitter through thin light while the country conspires with your moods to make an emotional soundtrack for your journey. As you move through this setting, you sense fear as a bassline underscoring an air of tragedy. All the time you drive (and it takes several hours to get free of the place once it's quickened your pulses), you are haunted by fear and tragedy. For this stretch of country is an immense, historical crime-scene. In the landscape of Central Queensland, old passions

and violent secrets are lying around in a million clues and traces. Whatever colonialism was and is, it has made this place unsettled and unsettling.

Between the physical geography and the 'cultural' settings that get created in imaginative tale-telling and picture-making, there always lies a landscape — a place where nature and culture contend and combine in history. As soon as you experience thoughts, emotions or actions in a tract of land, you find you're in a landscape. North of Rockhampton these contending forces have built the landscape known as the Horror Stretch. Crossing and recrossing it so curiously, you begin to understand that this 'bad' landscape might be a revelation of horrors past. You realise that badlands are not only driveable. They can be staked out in the past of a place, in a time just the other side of your immediate consciousness. Just outside the glare of your headlights.

A Daoist motto declares that 'surprise and subtle instruction might come forth from the Useless'. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* takes this as true for the Central Queensland badlands. After years of contemplating the Horror Stretch, I've found that this seemingly useless place never stops teaching by surprising and disturbing. It offers hard lessons about a society recovering from colonialism. It can be disturbing enough — and beautiful enough — to goad us into thinking more boldly about how the past produces the

present. This remembering is something good we can do in response to the bad in our lands.

RECENTLY

Version 1

Land Gone Wrong

In March 1986, fishermen working the ocean off Rockhampton found themselves in a Salvador Dali painting. The water was tinged milky-grey and clotted with the white bellies of thousands of dead fish. In the pungent air, a parade of goblins floated past: shetland ponies bloating to donkey size; a mad carousel of angora goats matted with red clay and threaded together by barbed fencing wire; zebu cattle gassed up and bobbing like ocean-mines, some of them exploding in the sharp morning sun. Sharks were cruising about, glutting on the feast. A fisherman remembered hearing all those thwacking jaws: a noise like a team of axemen working in a rainy forest. And overseeing everything as if spying on the sleep of reason, a motor-tricycle waded on out-sized knobbly tyres, its headlamp an unshockable eye.

A couple of weeks earlier, Tropical Cyclone Winifred had attacked the Central Queensland coast, and now

the Fitzroy and Mackenzie Rivers were spewing out everything indigestible that they had guzzled when their floodwaters took the inland plains. In recent years, graziers had grown cocky, lulled into complacency by high yields of wheat and cattle. Emboldened by the good years, they had stocked right up to the river banks. But now the country had weltered on the settlers and millions of dollars of assets were afloat.

A helicopter beamed its pictures to my television in a distant city. The 'Horror Stretch' was in the news again, returning to popular attention as it does every few years, presenting itself simultaneously as an absurdity and an epiphany. The TV report brought back questions that have come to me thousands of times. How to account for this strange place, this 'Horror Stretch'? What kind of setting is it? What omen?

No single answer suffices, but this is a start: it is a tract of land that went bad. It went bad in its tropical ecology and in the minds of the many generations of people who have told tales about it.

And who are its people?

A great brawl of humanity has lived here. During the 1860s the Aboriginal clans along the Fitzroy and Pioneer Rivers saw Scottish, English and Norwegian land-grabbers ride in on the beasts called horses, to be followed a few months later by big mobs of sheep herded by nervous Irish farm workers brandishing machetes and axes. Within a few wet seasons the sheep sickened. Then beef cattle were driven on to the scrubby

plains around Rockhampton while near Mackay, and to the north, sugar cane was planted in riverine tracts soon to be tended by thousands of Melanesian labourers. As the decades reeled away, Singhalese labourers and Chinese gold prospectors and market-gardeners also entered the district ahead of Italian peasants looking for the new-world chance. Soon Maltese families also began to jostle for work in the sugar country. And later, in the aftermath of World War II, Greek, Slavic and Scandinavian proletariat were to settle and struggle there too.

Nowadays vestiges of all these different lives persist in a place that has developed social turbulence matching the weather which periodically deranges the country.

squall and calm

Ecological imbalances intensified in the country after World War II when new land-claimers arrived hoping to make the place submit at last to industrial-scale agriculture. During the 1940s and 50s, farmers took to the country with prodigious aggression. They ring-barked millions of brigalow trees and left them to wither through summer. Come winter, platoons of men re-entered the paddocks and commenced burning, bulldozing and drenching with arsenic pentoxide. Bone-coloured tree-trunks leaned about sickly, like battle

casualties. Truly, it looked as if war had come to the plains. In fact many of the new farmers wielding spray-guns were ex-soldiers who had taken up land grants from the federal government when the armed forces were demobilised after the Japanese surrender. The farmers purchased cannon trailers and Matilda tanks from government war surplus sales and began blitzing the scrub, pushing blades, grading, rolling, dragging and dousing. Light planes bombed the country with a brew called 245-T and Tordon, which are alternative names for Agent Orange. These battles were to last decades.

By the 1970s, enough scrub had been scoured away to make wheat cultivation seem viable. Huge acacia tracts were denuded and farmers planted record acreages of grain. No-one was aware that the plough blades were chopping and spreading the tree roots in segments which lay in the soil like time-bombs ready to sprout millions of shoots when the right kind of rain came. For a few years, fantastic wealth was reaped from the fresh nitrogenous fields which had been made fertile by the legume-nodules of the brigalow. Stock were auctioned off and fences were pulled down to increase the extent of wheat runs. The country shone like a vast gold coin.

But the grain yields began to decline as each annual crop sucked draughts of nitrogen from a topsoil which now carried no brigalow to replenish the fertility. The earth tarnished from gold to dusty grey. Cyclones

howled in. Floods washed entire empires into the rivers. After which the sun baked the slurry into a ceramic shield. Farmers then felt as scalded and exposed as the country. They realised that they could not return to running cattle because they had destroyed their own fences and dams during the wheat boom. Then after the ruin they saw the acacia profusely sprouting again from the ploughed-in root fragments, and they saw the surviving cattle bellying down in mud whenever the rains came back. Faced with the enormity of all that can go bad, many battlers simply went AWOL, leaving the tanks and mortgaged tractors to rust, where some can still be found today, completely demobilised at last. With each new rainy season, machines settle a little more obstinately on their axles.

Meanwhile, in the sugar country at the northern end of the brigalow, the canegrowers have fared only a little better. Decade by decade they have tried to dodge between drought and drenching. Each summer, big rain squalls assail the coastline. Wind tears at buildings and pasture. Water swells the hundreds of creeks that vein the hinterland between the Pacific coast and the Dividing Range. If the squalls intensify into cyclones, lashings of ocean get shoved further west across the mountains, slathering the coastal plain on the way out to the inland erosion-country where the rain abates eventually, just as the floods begin to surge.

Cyclones are the turbines that generate Central Queensland floods. They come three or four times per

decade. January 1918 is the standard that every season gets measured against. In Mackay, ugly weather heaved up the Pioneer River, sucking ocean in behind it and expelling a tidal wave over the massive sand catchment at the river mouth. Gales funnelled the sea into the Pioneer Valley. It was like a huge set of bellows attached to a leaky hose. In the explosion of water, thirty people were drowned. Train and tram tracks, bridges, road-work, canefields, mills and houses were all thrashed south and west onto the brigalow country.

At the time of this deluge, a stoic, poetic man called George Randall was the lighthouse keeper on Flat Top Island, which is a rocky crumb choking the mouth of the Pioneer River. In the first blast of the cyclone, his shuddering stone cottage had been unroofed and he had huddled under debris while the cyclone refused to pass. When the winds abated two days later and 'the weather settled down thick & rainey', Randall toured the island with a notebook. He found that 'the entire shoreline was altered' and 'the beach was strewn with thousands of dead birds & also fish of all descriptions, including several large sharks and rock cod; many birds, though still alive, were too exhausted to move'. The earth had undergone a sea-change. In the following days most of the stockpiled sugar from the prodigious storage sheds of Mackay dissolved in the flooded, broken buildings. Fragrant syrup oozed into the streets and as the sun re-emerged the town baked slowly into a sticky pudding besieged by billions of

gorging bees. A huge humming muzzled the coast for a fortnight.

Enormous climatic surges have blustered each generation of newcomers who have tried to belong in Central Queensland. Squall and calm chase each other down the decades. Such weather is endemic to the Stretch and it underwrites human experience so that violence begins to seem natural. In its ecosystems, in its social systems, this place always seems ready to convulse.

made by imaginations

North of Rockhampton, you find this landscape where people are warned not to go. The tales told of this place suggest it is a lair for evil, either because malevolence flourishes naturally there, or because trouble has been shoved in there since colonial times, mustered and corralled there by the orderly settlements that have gradually been established in the gentler regions all around the brigalow. It's a badland clumping near the good and lawful land of greater Australia.

'Badlands' is a term coined two centuries ago in North America in response to a dreadful sense of insufficiency felt by Europeans forging into the more 'savage' parts of the 'new' world. The word originally applied to an extensive, parched tract of Dakota, where

erosion had sculpted the plains into a griddle of ravines and ridges that were described by early French travellers as *mauvaises terres à traverser* (bad lands to cross). Therefore a badland was originally a tract of country that would not succumb to colonial ambition.

In modern times, the connotations of the word have been bloodied by a trail of murders that were strewn across the states of Nebraska and Wyoming when a disturbed young man named Charley Starkweather stormed into the news during 1958. In one of the first live-television narrations of a criminal manhunt, an international audience followed the depredations of Starkweather and his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, Carole Fugate. They were dubbed the 'badlands killers'. (Two decades later they would become the subjects of Terrence Malick's majestic film, *Badlands*.) While bodies were discovered in farmhouses, wells and cars across the Great Plains, a communal panic was reported and redoubled in radio testimonies and gossip so that by the time Starkweather was apprehended, interviewed and syndicated, the mobile rampager had become an archetype in the mass-media bestiary.

Tales of murder and itinerancy in wild country are as old as the story of Cain in the killing-fields of Eden. But why do we still attend to stories of badlands? What cordons off these troublesome territories and highlights them so dramatically? A wrathful god? The devil? Nature following its own laws? Or fate, perhaps? No, badlands are made by imaginations that are prompted

by narratives. A badland is a narrative thing set in a natural location. A place you can actually visit, it is also laid out eerily by your mind before you get there. It is a disturbing place that you feel compelled to revisit despite all your wishes for comfort or complacency.

Most cultures contain prohibited or illicit spaces, but no-go zones are especially compelling within *colonial* societies. By calling a place ominous and bad, citizens can admit that a pre-colonial kind of 'savagery' lingers inside the colony even though most of the country has been tamed for husbandry and profit.

To own up to a badland may seem defeatist, like an admission that the habitat cannot be completely conquered. But a prohibited space can also appear encouraging to the extent that it shows that savagery can be encysted even if it cannot be eliminated. A badland can be understood as a natural space deployed in a cultural form to persuade citizens that unruliness can be simultaneously acknowledged and ignored. This is the kind of paradox that myths usually support. In a culture unconvinced of its sovereignty in the landscape, a badland is mythic and far from useless.

human limits

Australia's most famous badland has long been the 'dead centre' of the outback. Charles Sturt's descriptions

of the terrain he explored west of the Murrumbidgee during the 1830s are definitive. His journals depict a landscape without solace:

It is impossible for me to describe the kind of country we were now traversing, or the dreariness of the view it presented. The plains were still open to the horizon, but here and there a stunted gum tree, or a gloomy cypress, seemed placed by nature as mourners over the surrounding desolation. Neither beast nor bird inhabited these lonely and inhospitable regions, over which the silence of the grave seemed to reign.

In the paragraphs that follow this description, Sturt becomes the consummate myth-maker, manipulating his reader's anxieties, paradoxically sounding ominous at the same time as he is consoling. At the edge of this void, he explains how he encountered his own human limits (which stood for the colony's social limits) and then he transcended them — after the anxiety comes the solace. For even though these wastelands are undeniable and intractable, they must be understood to be negligible in comparison to the benign territories which had been successfully settled all over the colony. By highlighting these desolate, impenetrable regions momentarily, Sturt could encourage colonists with his memories of the more lively portion of the continent. Readers could thus acknowledge a sense of vulnerability and incapacity whilst sequestering their qualms in a restricted zone which they could ignore so long as they

stayed within the well-husbanded majority of the settlement.

The myths of the Horror Stretch work in a similar way. The isolation of this landscape, its eeriness, its narratives of violence all set the Capricorn scrub apart from the rest of the Queensland coast. It is a place where evil can be banished so that goodness can be credited, by contrast, in the regions all around. It's our own local badland, a place set aside for a type of story that we still seem to need.

SEVEN
VERSIONS
of an
AUSTRALIAN
BADLAND

ross gibson

University of Queensland Press

SEVEN VERSIONS of an AUSTRALIAN BADLAND

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I sniff a fire burning without outlet,
consuming acrid its own smoke.

John Berryman, 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet'

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