`Contour-Line by Contour': Landscape Change as an Index of History in the Poetry of Les Murray

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WITH the sequence *The Idyll Wheel* (1989) Les Murray brought to a close the mythic journey of 'home-coming', which had sustained much of his best work over two decades, at least since the end of 'Noonday Axeman':

I will be always coming back here on the up-train, peering, leaning out of the window to see, on far-off ridges, the sky between the trees, and over the racket of the rails, to hear the echo and the silence.

This journey of return to what the French poet Yves Bonnefoy called *l'arrière-pays*, and Murray in a translation of the equivalent Aboriginal term came to see as his *spirit country*, developed a number of generic characteristics over the years from 'Noonday Axeman' to 'The Returnees' and *The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song-Cycle*. The observer is in actual physical motion through a landscape in a vehicle (train, car or boat) which to a certain extent demarcates mind and world, or which mediates, if you like, between mediatior and meditated. The movement of temporal observation through the space of the poem unwinds the attenuation of consciousness inherent in the observer's exile, which is the interior (as much as the exterior) starting-point of the poem. Distance shrinks, and the tension between outside and inside, the sense of an embattled mind in hostile territory, is released as the observer reconnects with an intimately known landscape through the process which *The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle* calls 'relearning that country'. The *Cycle* moves from the level of place-names marked on official road-maps, to the secret ones known only to denizens of the local community, to the ones sacred to individuals: the sacred sites of identity, where the mind is not, like that of Milton's Satan, 'its own place'.

This recovery of a sense of wholeness, where the inner world finds itself back at the centre of an outer world, which corresponds to its *imago mundi*, has important implications for the conceptualisation of landscape in the poetry. For as the underlying elation at resynchronisation breaks through to the surface of the observing consciousness, the perception changes sense, as it were, from vision to hearing. A similar transmutation from the visual to the acoustic happens in this passage from 'The Returnees':

Bestowing tourbillions that drowned
the dusty light we had used up,
pulling the distance to us, we
were conscious of a lifelong sound
The difference between a landscape visually and a landscape acoustically perceived is profound, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty pointed out in *La phénoménologie de la perception* and Walter Ong repeated in *Orality and Literacy*. Vision orders an outside world stretched out in front of you; hearing puts you at the centre of a surrounding world. Wholeness and harmony/disharmony is to auditory perception what distinction and background/foreground is to visual. I hope to show, if only in outline, the implications for Murray’s poetry of his movement from a point of view in a visual/literary world which aspires to the auditory/oral as a kind of ecstatic transcendence to a point of speaking from inside an auditory/oral world. Every idea, every form, shifts meaning in the move from a landscape shaped by the eye to one apprehended by the ear.

It is my contention that Murray faced, consciously or not, a poetic challenge with his return to live permanently at Bunyah, for so long the distant attractor of his art, the centre from which he was exiled and to which he made his periodic returns. He returned for good in the middle of writing the collection which became *The Daylight Moon* (1987), but from the beginning of that collection a change had begun in Murray’s meditations on landscape, indeed in his perception and conception of what constitutes a landscape. From being personal, the journey which organises the poem becomes cultural, historical; the movement through the poem, from being a temporary trajectory across a changing landscape, becomes a retracing of that very cultural-historical movement through which European-Australian time has been spatialised, and from within which the landscape can be apprehended. Not that this had not always been a dimension of the poems, but now the very meditative movement shifts from being a response to the visually unfolded prospect to being a reminiscence on historical landscape change. The culmination is perhaps the last poem in *The Daylight Moon*, ‘Aspects of Language and War on the Gloucester Road’:

I travel a road cut through time
by bare feet and men without socks,
by eight-year old men droving cattle,
by wheels parallel as printed rhyme
over rhythms of hill shale and tussocks.

In the hardest real trouble of my life
I called this Gloucester road to mind,
which cuttings were bare gravel, which rife
with grass, which ones rainforest-vined.

The road starts at Coolongolook
which means roughly Leftward Inland,
from gu/unggal, the left hand,
runs west between Holdens’ and James’
where new people have to paint names
on their mailboxes, and stumps have board-slots
from when tall trees were jibbed like yachts
and felled above their hollow tones . . . .

'Aspects of Language and War' not only reflects, but is also a reflection on, the change in Murray's practice. The personal is encapsulated (in a kind of interior dialogue) within the historical, which only becomes real — i.e. embodied personally and communally — in Murray's work when it is inscribed in (and read from) the landscape. Geography serves as the projected point of communication between language and the mind: spatial direction and verse (the interchange between sound and print, the aural and the visual) are both imaged by the road, which here runs not towards but through and from Bunyah. Moreover, the lines 'wheels parallel as printed rhyme/over rhythms of hill shale and tussocks' point back to the similar lines in the poem 'Exile Prolonged for Real Reasons' in The People's Otherworld (1983).

This poem contained a crucial phrasing of the basic tension in Murray's whole conception of landscape when he says of his early years in Sydney: 'I was learning to judge landscape/ not for food but blasphemously, as landscape'. It is this dichotomy between the practical-existential and the aesthetic contemplation of landscape that the poems in The Daylight Moon and The Idyll Wheel set out to bridge, thus addressing a basic opposition not only in Murray's own poetic world-view (between the city and the bush, Boeotia and Athens), but in general landscape theory. It is The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, which John Barrell has found entered into conflict in the imagination of the English poet John Clare at the time of the Enclosures. According to Barrell, Clare's peasant knowledge of the fields and commons round his native Helpston clashed with the aristocratic (or at least socially elitist) aesthetic of the prospect poem, which Clare tried to model himself on, and which (as practised in the 18th century by James Thomson, among others) relied on a visual division of the world into (privileged) foreground and (marginal) background. In Clare's poetry the idea of prospect breaks down, as he does not grade the contents of the landscape according to visual prominence, but instead enumerates everything he knows to be in the landscape, cumulatively, with scant regard for perspective. In Clare's life, as is well known, he lost his grip on sanity when a road was put through Helpston, making it no longer a world of its own, but a point on a line.

Barrell's implicitly Marxist link between landscape aesthetics, individual psychology and political economy (the dissociation of the peasantry, if you like) is probably crucial to an understanding of the development of landscape poetry in English from the Renaissance, where the poets' delight in imaginative possession of their world, even their emerging sense of an individual self distinct from the community, was intimately tied to the landscape of the Enclosures, indeed 'offers an encloser's eye view': Sir Philip Sidney did much of his writing in a recently enclosed landscape; George Herbert imaged his soul as a deer park (see David Norbrook's introduction to the new Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse, 6). By the time of the Romantics the framed view had become the essence of landscape perception — and landscape in its turn a kind of Claude-glass of the mental state, the creative imagination, so that Coleridge could write to a friend, 'I would that I could wrap up the view from my house in a pill of opium, & send it to you' (quoted in Grevel Lindop, 16).

But before one concludes that 'landscape' is an aesthetics of dispossession turned into a disembodied gaze, it is worth noting that the word 'landscape', though it enters the English language as a painterly term borrowed from Dutch, goes back to the
Germanic term *Landschaft*, which (as John Stilgoe, the professor of landscape history at Harvard, reminds us in his *Common Landscape of America*) means basically what John Barrell calls ‘the sense of place’:

a collection of dwellings and other structures crowded together within a circle of pasture, meadow and planting fields and surrounded by unimproved forest or marsh. Like the Anglo-Saxon *tithing* and the Old French *vill*, the word meant more than an organization of space; it connoted too the inhabitants of the place and their obligations to one another and to the land... In the *landschaft* fields and structures share equal importance... The twelve- to fifteen-square-mile area was home to perhaps 300 people, satisfying almost all their wants and recognizing every rod of ground as vitally important. Meadows, arable fields, and pastures produced more than food; they gave identity to each inhabitant. (Stilgoe, 12)

Murray in *The Daylight Moon* and *The Idyll Wheel* instigates a counter-movement to the historical development in landscape perception I have sketched: back to the original concept. Where John Clare’s world was disrupted by a road, Murray recomposes semi-traditional landscapes from the road, with the peasant’s sense of intimate knowledge, but also with a historical awareness of the oppression and destruction of the traditional peasantry:

An east-running valley where two hooded creeks make junction and two snoring roads make a rainguttered cross of function:

— this is how the verse ‘Preface’ to *The Idyll Wheel* begins to describe Bunyah, but it disclaims the status of ‘a cyclic calendar/ of miniature peasantry painted as for a proprietor’; it inverts the genre of the *Shepherd’s Calendar* (from Spenser to Clare) at the same time as it invokes it; for ‘No one can own all Bunyah. Names shouted over coal-oil lamps/ cling to their paddocks’. Which goes to make clear why the first poem in the sequence, ‘Leaf Spring’ about the antipodean autumn month of April, paints a picture of Bunyah in such colours as ‘Disposals khaki boiled in tankwater’ and ‘barbed-wire-tattered navy wool’ instead of the luxurious cobalt and leaf gold of the Limbourg brothers in the *Tres riches heures du Duc de Berry*, though Murray’s landscape is in the process of transforming itself towards the end with ‘skims of leek and sherry’, ‘tipped bronze and citrine’. It is the continent of Australia, of course, which in Murray’s vision has inverted both season and generic expectations, sense of space and class ownership.

There was always, in Murray’s poetic ‘home-comings’, along with the transition from the visual to the auditory perception of the world, a move into a space which is intimate, yet unenclosed, where the distinction between background and foreground has become blurred: ‘After the last gapped wire on a post,/ homecoming for me to enter the gum forest’ says the poem ‘The Gum Forest’, ‘In there for miles, shade track and ironbark slope,/ depth casually beginning all around, at a little distance.’ By ‘Equanimity’ (in *The People’s Otherworld*) this apparent visual confusion has become a religious vision, indeed a definition of God, in His peculiarly Australian manifestation:

a field all foreground, and equally all background, like a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent like God’s attention. Where nothing is diminished by perspective.
To Murray the medieval mystical notion of God as 'a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere' is confirmed by the Australian landscape; in the essay 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia' he says, 'God, in Australia, is a vast blue-and-gold landscape, whose devotees wear ragged shorts and share his sense of humour'. The implications of God having become a landscape for the ways in which history, ecology and society are to be conceived in Australian space and time come out in Murray's essay 'Eric Rolls and the Golden Disobedience', where he praises Rolls's *A Million Wild Acres* for its 'almost pointillist' vision of history, which is not sequential but accretive, 'made up of strings of vivid, minute fact which often curl around in intricate knottings of digression' (*Persistence in Folly* 160):

everything is in motion yet held in a sort of dynamic tableau, measuring some thousands of square miles by about 160 years. In contradistinction to most European art since the Middle Ages, there is little sense of background and foreground, that perspective of heroic agents acting out their drama before a series of theatre flats, the Renaissance schema by which the aristocratic principle was able to triumph over an older Christian 'field' (the sense of Everyman or *Piers Plowman's Field Full of Folk*), in which prominence was reserved for supernatural figures. In Rolls' presentation, things human and non-human are all happening inter-relatedly, and the humans barely stand out. Through a fusion of vernacular elements with fine-grained natural observation, and a constant movement of back-reference, he breaks through sequential time not to timelessness but to a sort of enlarged spiritual present in which no life is suppressed. (*Persistence in Folly* 161).

Such an enlarged or even eternal present was always the plane to which Murray's 'homecomings' transcended. It is the plane on which the past comes alive in the present, on which the different cultures which have inhabited the same space can meet, on which European-Australian and Aboriginal culture touch because their mindsets have to come to terms with the same continent, at some level of ecology. Or one might say, it is where the 'White Australian Dreamtime', which in Murray's conceptual world is history turned into timeless myth (the opposite orientation of the Aboriginal concept) becomes physical. In *The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle* this is effected through tangible objects from the past ('abandoned things are thronged with spirits') held in the cumulation of over-length lines, which Murray borrowed from the Berndts' translations of Aboriginal song-cycles. The lines give a sense of dynamic, heightened stasis, of variation in monotony, and graphically portray the foothills of the Dividing Range, which form an interactive backdrop to the poem.

In *The Daylight Moon* this plane of transcendence has become a kind of ever-present, all-embracing organism, like James Lovelock's *Gaia hypothesis* (in which the planet Earth is seen as a single organism). Murray's 'Australia hypothesis', I would argue, gathers the continent into a system of sense-waves around the observer, who speaks from inside a system which is in itself a landscape. He has been projected bodily (with his sensuous range) into an intimate, but also new world: probing what is around him, but to a certain extent deliberately avoiding an overarching vision, a prospect — and instead making the underlying conception of the whole an auditory one.

It is only the radical scale of Murray's project that is new: the acoustic has been part of the essence of European-Australian landscape poetry since Harpur, Kendall and Neilson; not just birds, but trees have been conceived as speaking, singing and playing music.' Murray is sounding a trope when in his essay 'In a Working Forest'
he sees different species of trees playing a symphony of soil variation. And indeed the poetic ecology of *The Daylight Moon* resounds with the echo of other great Australian landscape poets: the early Judith Wright’s concern with making the land tell stories (as in Aboriginal culture); Douglas Stewart’s idea of evoking vastness through attention to minute detail. The poem ‘The Sleepout’ is remade out of the living matter and sounds of Roland Robinson’s ‘The Cradle’, the story in ‘Federation Style on the Northern Rivers’ is assumed back into the decor of Kenneth Slessor’s ‘Country Towns’.

‘The bush permits allusion, not illusion,’ claims the ‘Verse Letter to Dennis Haskell’, presumably in answer to a question as to whether Murray’s return to Bunyah was motivated by romantic nostalgia. And ‘allusions’, of course, are auditory while ‘illusions’ are visual — which has implications for the conceptualisation of time and space in the landscape of *The Daylight Moon* and *The Idyll Wheel*; the next line of Murray’s rejoinder to Haskell runs ‘I didn’t come for any past that’s gone’, which is further amplified in the verse ‘Preface’ to *The Idyll Wheel*: ‘Being back home there, where I am all my ages,/ I wanted to trace a year through all its stages ... As forefather Hesiod may have learned too, by this time,/ things don’t recur precisely, on the sacred earth: they rhyme’.

Times coexist in *The Daylight Moon* in a more radical way than previously: ‘upcountry, men of the Thirties in 1950s uniform/ instruct youths and girls of the starving fourteen hundreds/ how to conjure with rifles the year 1792’ in the poem ‘1980 in a Street of Federation Houses’, while the main character ‘shifts to another year, along the band/ of his car’s stereo’.

Both seasonal time and historical time are acoustically reconceived, as are in fact most aspects of being-in-the-world: both in personal terms in ‘Hearing Impairment’, where incipient deafness is shown not to lessen but to increase sensitivity to the auditory, and in cosmic-religious terms in ‘Bats’ Ultrasound’, which anticipates the *Translations from the Natural World* of Murray’s latest collection by transposing another species’ sense of being-in-the-world into the humanly audible range. This retunes time of day and evolutionary-historical time into a world mapped by radar waves between the highly mobile hunters and the all-encompassing recipient:

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ah, eyrie-ire, aero hour, eh?
O'er our ur-area (our era aye
er e your raw row) we air our array,
err, yaw, row wry — aura our orrery,
our eerie ë our ray, our arrow.
A rare ear, our aery Yahweh.
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This answers the question posed in the poem about radio-telescopes in ‘Machine Portraits with Pendant Spaceman’ (from *The People’s Otherworld*) — ‘What is the universe in?’ — by posing the landscape that is God as a transcendent ear. But it also puts into perspective (acoustically, that is: through echo, rhyme and puns) the meditations on (and probings of) history which form the major part of *The Daylight Moon*. The ‘daylight moon’, a recurrent image in his work, is what lights Les Murray’s imagination: the implied otherworld in this world; the ‘other side’ of space and time, landscape and history; the space in time, the history in landscape; the shadows of the other senses in what the poem ‘Equanimity’ calls the ‘pointedly visual’ minds of humans and birds.

In ‘Flood Plains on the Coast Facing Asia’ the European-Australian intrusion into
the landscape is presented above all as a shattering sound. The airboat on a tourist trip through Kakadu becomes a metaphor for European time and history and their difference from the space being intruded on:

... like a rocket loudening
to liftoff, it erects the earsplitting
wigwam we must travel in
everywhere here, and starts skimming
at speed on the never-never
meadows on the monsoon wetland.

It is 'the warring sound/ of our peaceful tour', which brings into view the natural and Aboriginal cultural landscape, though when the poem tries to turn to prospect, the gaze is immediately inverted and with it the colonising, progressive conception of time:

Watched by distant plateau cliffs
stitched millenially in every crevice
with the bark-entubed dead
we do not go ashore.
Those hills are ancient stone gods
just beginning to be literature.

The irruption of movement, historical and mechanical time, is absorbed in the vastly different time-scales of the geological and Aboriginal-mythological landscape. Even on the flood-plain itself, the linear time-scale of the airboat quickly loses itself in circles:

We leave at most a darker green
trace on the universal glittering
and, waterproof in cream and blue,
waterlilies on their stems, circling . . .

And, following this line of thought, the visually perceived water-landscape gives way to the acoustically conceived, which adds a vertical dimension to the visual play of surfaces:

We also receive, in drifts of calm,
hushing . . .
how the fuzzed gold innumerable cables
by which this garden hangs skyward
branch beneath the surface, like dreams.

Each stanza-like section of the poem circles back on itself in a similar way — as does the whole meditation, which ends on image rather than statement (showing a poet in control, without need of a punchline). The scene with the crocodile repeats the inversion of the gaze, the reabsorption of the disturbance into the landscape, and the over-all insignificance of the human intrusion in the face of creaturely otherness:

On an unlilled deep, bare even
of minute water fern, it leaped out,
surged man-swift straight under us. We ran over it.
We circle back. Unhurt, it floats, peering
from each small eye turret, then annuls
buoyancy and merges subtly under,
swollen leathers becoming gargoyle stone,
chains of contour, with pineapple abdomen.

The ecological life-chains and ‘the powerful dream of being harmless,/ the many chains
snapped and stretched hard for that’ come to coexist in the organism of Murray’s
‘Australia hypothesis’. They remain as traces in the meditative landscape, which Murray
developed to its full poetic potential in poems like ‘The Grassfire Stanzas’ and ‘The
Craze Field of Dried Mud’. Here it is varied with the addition of water, the element
whose return (signifying fertility and spiritual rebirth) was foreshadowed everywhere
in ‘The Craze Field’ and would spell the destruction of its delicate, desiccated museum
shapes. On the ‘Flood Plains’, water and fluidity assure the relatively undestructive
intrusion of humans as well as the mirror images of paradise in the post-lapsarian,
and the fractally spiralling life-chains from the trace of the Water Serpent to the double
helix of DNA.

The landscapes in The Daylight Moon move towards no vanishing point of
perspectival art or thought, but towards the containment of contour lines. The idea
(or mental and embodied form) of contour lines bridges visual and acoustic, perceptual
landscape and conceptual culture, when the first poem of The Idyll Wheel surveys
the Bunyah valley:

Contour line by contour
cattle walk the hills, in a casual-seeming
prison strung from buried violins . . . .

This is the landscape (agricultural settlement pattern) and culture (oral-musical) Murray
wants to write himself back into, and from within which he reconsiders Australian
history both from and towards its beginnings. Hence, partly, his return (more
particularly apparent in Dog Fox Field (1991)) to the bush ballad, doggerel and the
often unabashed statement of the prejudices of the Australian rural culture with which
he identifies. But hence also the deeply meditated configuration of Australian history
in the longer poems in The Daylight Moon, so intensely concerned with the place
of history in the present-day landscape and how this history can be apprehended.

The poem ‘Cumulus’ sees history as a continual retreat into the folds and faults
of the Great Dividing Range, where the contour lines are translated from the solidity
of geology into the ephemerality of meteorology. The past is ‘continually modelled’
into ‘horizons above the nation, now visited rarely/ except in polemic hiking or on
the ski niveaux’. As Australians have turned their attention to the beach and the surf,
the hills and mountains have become a reservoir for memories and legends, which
half-forgotten and ghostlike merge into each other ‘down the crumples of the possum­
skin rug, / the great ravines of catchment. Jindabygone, Adamemory.’

But this Divide, a contact zone between Aboriginal and European Australia, between
outlaws and imperial authority (‘Of Governors fleeing heat on the hill-stations, we
recall Jimmy . . . ’), also blocks the view to the ‘real Australia’ (‘real’ in the medieval
scholastic sense). What the poem ‘Louvres’ calls the ‘three quarters of our continent/
set aside for mystic poetry’ is the great magnet or sustaining entropy into which the
tension of the poems unwinds: whether it is ‘Louvres’, or in ‘The Sleepout’, where
it signifies the antipodean world of dream under ‘the daylight moon’, or ‘The Dream
of Wearing Shorts Forever’, which ends with the persona ‘walking meditatively/ among
green timber, through the grassy forest/ towards a calm sea/ and looking across to more of that great island/ and the further topics'.

The integration of coastline and continent is profoundly connected with the integration of vision and the other senses, especially those related to hearing, kinesis and balance. And it is almost mystically connected with the two elements of mobility, fire and water. 'With the eye and eye-adjuncts/ mind sees only what is burning, the peak nodes of fury/ that make all spiralling in on them/ or coronally near, blowing outward from them/ look eager, intense, even brave', says the poem 'Infra Red', adding, 'Most of the real/ however is obscurely reflective ...' and positing an alternative, 'more complete', cosmology of 'presence' to that of light. In 'Freshwater and Salt', a sense of kinetic cosmic balance, which is also that of coast and inland, is based on the fact that 'the world's widest ocean/ can hide under other names: the air,/ ice sheets, ink, farming history. But life's saline/ linings are its ultimate shore.'

In *The Daylight Moon* water carries the vehicles of meditation, which are not here the fast cars of Murray's earlier work, e.g. 'The Burning Truck' or 'Portrait of the Autist as a New World Driver', nor are these vehicles the shells from within which the landscape is apprehended. Rather, these vehicles carrying time are seen from the outside, from the landscape they traverse. In 'Flood Plains' history itself is seen as a vehicle:

> We discuss Leichhardt's party and their qualities
> when, hauling the year 1845
> through here, with spearheads embedded in it,
> their bullock drays reached and began skirting
> this bar of literal water
> after the desert months which had been
> themselves a kind of swimming,
> a salt undersea plodding, monster-haunted
> with odd very pure surfacings.

'Federation Style on the Northern Rivers' begins with an evocation of continuous fluidity: 'And entering on the only smooth road/ this steamer glides past the rattling shipyard ... the river opens and continually opens/ and lashed on deck, a Vauxhall car' (the image of Federation) 'cruises up country with a moveless wheel' to become the instrument for solving 'a knot of debt' in a riverside town. But above all, 'The Megaethon: 1850, 1906-29' illustrates this peculiar constellation of vehicle and meditation, fire and water, vision and hearing, history and mental space. A steam engine (in its very conception an integration of fire and water) being 'walked/ home under its own power' becomes a very complex metaphor of history, not through speedy progress ('making four miles a day, it's no fizzer'), but rather through its ponderousness. Mechanisation makes its presence felt kinetically and acoustically before visually; the Megaethon through its very impact on the ground seems to change space and time and set a freeing of the world in motion:

> On black iron plates that lean down
> and flatten successively, imprinting
> rectangular billets of progression
> it advances on the Hawkesbury district
> hissing, clanking, stoked by freed men.
> People run from oat-field and wash-house,
> from pot-house and cockpit to gape
> at its shackled gai, its belt-drive pulsation
... the iron gangs straighten from their sad triangular thoughts to watch another mighty value approach along their spadework.

In that last dissolving convict year what passes their wedged grins is a harbinger not merely of words like *humdinger*, but of stumpjump ploughs, metal ores made float, ice plants, keel wings, a widening vote, the world's harvesters, the utility truck, rotary engines pipemoulds lawnmowers — this motor the slaves watch strikes a ringing New World note.

... only the poorest, though, watching from dry bush in that chain-tugging year, last before the gold rush know that here is a centre of the world and that one who can rattle the inverted cosmos is stamping to her stamping ground.

The Aborigines, in Murray's peculiar organicist vision of the Antipodes, are the first to realise fully that this rather impractical piece of machinery is in fact the native Australian genius of inventiveness and mother of ideas. 'Her' apparition at this crucial change of phase in post-conquest history (between convictism and gold rushes) not only foreshadows the new forms of democracy made possible by the mechanisation of labour, but places Australia on a different road of development from America, one that Murray seems to suggest all ideas have to take in the Antipodes: 'the idea of the Megaethon/ must travel underground'. When it resurfaces 'in Melbourne at last/ in the mind of one Frank Bettrill', it is late enough to be more for peaceful than warlike ends: 'its polygonal/ rhythms will engender no balladry/ it won't break the trench-lines at Vicksburg'. It is not as a tank, but as an early combine harvester, giant tractor and bulldozer that it 'reenters quaintness', the Dreamtime of machines.

Australian history is not, however, without its dark side as presented in *The Daylight Moon*. The historical landscape most completely reimagined according to the dynamic tableau/pointillist field approach of Eric Rolls comes through in 'Physiognomy on the Savage Manning River'. The view is simultaneously that of the Scottish Highland immigrants on a ship c. 1848 (when Murray's own ancestors arrived) and the contemporary audience:

Beyond the river brush extends the deserted Aboriginal hunting park. There is far less blue out in the grassland khaki than in our lifetime though the hills are darkening, sprinkling outward, closing on crusted lagoons. Nowhere a direct line; no willows yet, nor any houses. Those are in the low hills upriver. Beyond are the ranges, edge over edge, like jumbled sabres.

Crocodile chutes slant out of the riverbank forest where great logs have been launched. It is the long-unburnable dense forest of the dooligarl. The cannibal solitary humanoid of no tribe. Here, as worldwide, he and she are hairy, nightmare-agile, with atavisms of the feet.
Horror can be ascribed and strange commissions given
to the fireless dooligarl. Killer, here, of gingery bat-hunters.

Tiptoeing after its slung leadline, the ship moves forward
for hours into the day. Raising the first dogless paddocks,
the first houses, the primal blowflies ...

It is vision which opens this country for settlement, vision which penetrates and thus
begins to reorder the Aboriginal landscape created by fire husbandry and taboos. A
dreamspace both paradisial and haunted at its borders by ghostly predecessors
(assimilated here to a universal yeti-Grendel-devil figure) is changed to a panorama
cinematographically unfolded as contour lines of time layered like film in the landscape.
Space is temporalised with the arrival of historical time on the river, but time is never
allowed to turn linear and make the landscape into a mere backdrop to human
(European colonial) history. Rather it is the landscape as an active spatio-temporal
organism which makes subsequent historical change momentarily visible to the eyes
observing from the river and the present:

Now the gently wrecking cornfields relax, and issue
parents and children. What do families offer us?
Some protection from history,
a tough school of forgiveness.
After the ship has twitched minutely out of
focus and back, as many times as there were barrels
and night has assumed the slab huts and sawn houses
the faces drinking tea by their various lights
include some we had thought modern ...

And, walking on that early shore in our bodies
(perhaps the only uncowardly way to do history)
if we asked leading questions, we might hear,
short of a ringing ear,
something like: we do what’s to be done
and some things because we can.
Don’t be taking talk out of me.

From vision to kinetics to the full body and then the ear the senses move in order
to grasp the central meaning in a poem which is in many respects Murray’s Heart
of Darkness: a heart found in a past that is not so much repressed as sub rosa, secret,
and only to be recovered and revealed by acknowledging one’s own complicity through
family. Most of Australian history in the 19th century happened sub rosa, according
to Murray’s essay on Rolls. The land-taking (squatting) and acquisition of wealth,
as well as the massacres of Aborigines and intermarriage all escaped the official records
—and in the poem this is metaphorically conveyed through a set of images of
concealment from the riverbank mangroves to the hooped skirts of Miss Isabella Kelly
(also related to the sails of the ship) to the ‘acanthus leaf/ of motivation modelled
over something barer’ of her ‘useful legend’. Whereas the Aborigines had consigned
a space in the landscape to horrors, European culture ascribes horrors to the past.
But this past is only partly revealed by the physiognomies in old photographs (they
are too present). Much more comes out in the silences between the lines of what is
told about the past (hence the slapping of the descendants’ ears, for impertinence)
in the oral culture about which Murray writes. But even here there is a twist: for the
prophecy spoken at the end of the poem is in Scots Gaelic.
In Murray's incarnationist (and in Father Ong's phrase 'verbomotoric', Ong 68) ideal of 'doing history', the 'word' becomes all-important, as in the poem 'Fastness':

I am listening for words the eldest
of three brothers must have uttered
magically, out of their whole being
to make a sergeant major look down
at the stamped grass, and not have them stopped
as they walked, not trooped, off his shouting
showground parade . . .

The words, not their interpretation, are part of the landscape which bestows meaning:

... beyond the exact words, I need
the gesture with which they were said,
the horizons and hill air that shaped them,
the adze-facettod timbers of the kitchen
where they were repeated to the old people
... I need the angle of cloud forest,
visible briefly through that door, the fire chains
and the leaf tastes of tank water there.

I will only have history, lacking these,
not the words, as they have to be
spoken out, in such moments:

centrally, so as to pass the mind
of cheerful blustering authority
and paralyse it in its dream —

Writing from inside a culture he feels in constant danger of relegation, Murray can no longer treat home-coming as a vanishing point to transcendence. That moment during the First World War could all too easily have led the brothers into a 'cattle chute' and the 'the long blood trail a-winding'. Murray has turned instead to fractally side-stepping perspective and defensively circumscribing the immanence of culture, self and life: and he does this in the sprung rhythm of closed syllables and short, sharp vowels contrasting with deep, round ones, which in Dog Fox Field integrates doggerel and Celtic sound poetry into a texture all Murray's own which has begun to sound half-Chinese; or in the virtuoso solipsism of the creatures in Translations from the Natural World. More love, however, often comes through in the almost Faulknerian anecdotes, where Murray perfectly catches the pitch of the great vernacular white storytellers like his own father ('Joker as Told'), and where the music of his verse inscapes an oral-musical culture in its passing, most evocatively perhaps after the 'spoken videos' of 'The Kitchens':

Then someone might cup his hand short of the tongue
of a taut violin, try each string to be wrung
by the bow, that spanned razor of holy white hair
and launch all but his earthly weight into an air
that breathed up hearth fires strung world-wide between
the rung hills of being, and the pearled hills of been.
In the language beyond speaking, they'd sum the grim law,
speed it to a daedaly and foot it to a draw,
the tones of their scale five gnarled fingers wide
and what sang were all angles between love and pride.

WORKS CITED


