

AN “UPSIDE-DOWN LAND”: CONTESTED ROCK FORMATIONS IN THE NEW ENGLAND LANDSCAPE (AUSTRALIA)

Katherine Wright

Macquarie University
North Ryde, NSW 2109, Australia
Katherine.wright@students.mq.edu.au

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This paper focuses on three significant rock formations in the New England tableland landscape of New South Wales, Australia. In Australia’s contested postcolonial landscape rock contains the conflicting forces of an Aboriginal sacred located in the land and essentialist non-Indigenous settler narratives of belonging.

Bluff Rock is the alleged site of an Aboriginal massacre in the nineteenth century. Thunderbolt’s Rock is a boulder that celebrates a romanticised version of Australia’s settler beginnings. The Australian Standing Stones are a monument to the Celtic foundations of the region. In this paper I argue that these three rock forms display non-Aboriginal, Anglo-Celtic claims of autochthonous identity that marginalise Aboriginal sovereignty in the landscape.

Positioning this discussion in Australia’s current political climate of anti-immigration legislation and panic surrounding the arrival of illegal “boat people”, I argue that white Australian’s claims of autochthony exclude the possibility of alternative forms of belonging in the country. I propose an ethic of “surface thinking” to open up the landscape for inter-cultural dialogue and hospitality to new Australians.

Introduction

In the New England region of rural New South Wales, Australia, rock is a prominent landscape feature that seems to erupt from the soil like the resurgence of some ancient being. The Northern Tableland plateau is studded with granite outcrops — prehistoric dinosaur eggs that poke out of the dry brown paddocks. As you drive towards the sea you reach what feels like the end of the earth — an abrupt escarpment of extremely deep, entrenched gorges that cuts rocky slices out of the country.

In 1818, an English explorer, John Oxley, referred to the region as “an upside-down land” that defies “all rule” (1820, 298). For Oxley this perversion of the Alpine-style peaks of Europe was Antipodean yet uncannily familiar. Interpreting the escarpment through the frame of Northern hemisphere environments, his eyes were foggy with an opaque vision of sublime crests.

In imperial European discourse mountains are sacred¹ — pregnant with poetry and religion. Great adventurers embark on their journeys of ascent, becoming closer to their



Fig. 1. A waterfall on New England's Eastern escarpment

Judeo-Christian sky-God. This backwards place must have seemed perverse. If the spiritual is sky-bound and cloud-laced what universe was signalled by these tellurian gorges? While reflecting on the escarpment Oxley exclaimed, "[h]ow dreadful must the convulsion have been that formed these glens!" (Cited in Haworth, 2006, 26).

In this paper I am taking Oxley's vision of New England as the surreal inversion of Northern hemisphere environments as a starting point to explore the interaction of a colonial society with an alien continent peopled by an ancient culture. Rock is engaged as a poetic being that holds the deep time of the Earth and the myths of the cultures that traverse it, together, converged in its form.

The granite terrestrial creatures studded over the New England plateaux add sharp geometric shapes to cleared paddocks and grasslands. These dominating rock presences



Fig. 2. Sharp geometric rock forms in New England

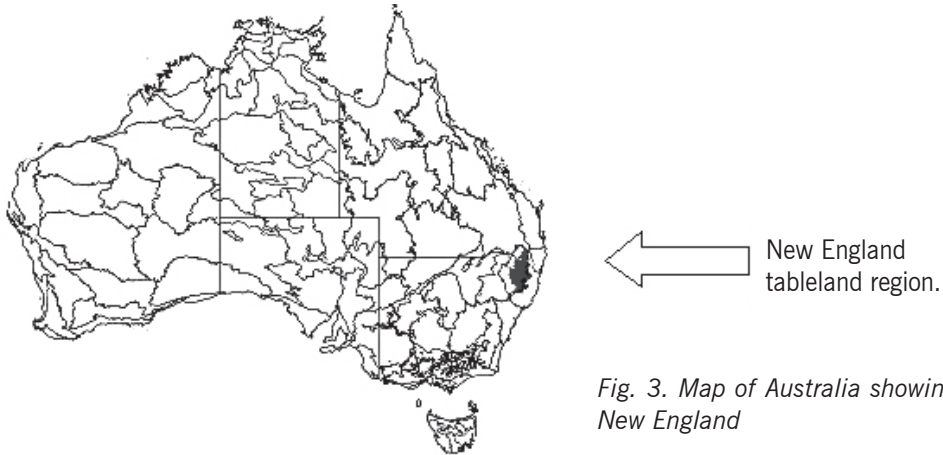


Fig. 3. Map of Australia showing New England

appear as land-dwelling icebergs — a tip poking through the surface and a deep mineral immensity beneath. Rock is an autochthonous creature, linked to the shifting tectonic history of the earth. This convergence between a subterranean geological past and the terrestrial human present is particularly fascinating in Australia's contested postcolonial landscape.

This discussion explores three significant rock formations in the New England landscape. Each site is located alongside New England's main highway and captures unreconciled ontology's and memories of settler and Indigenous Australian cultures. Bluff Rock is the alleged site of an Aboriginal massacre in the nineteenth century. Thunderbolt's Rock is a boulder that celebrates a romanticised version of Australia's settler beginnings. The Australian Standing Stones are a monument to the Celtic founders of the region erected in 1992. As mnemonic landscape features, these New England rock inhabitants illuminate the tensions between hegemonic and subaltern versions of Australian history.

Rock and time

Now determined to have been inhabited for somewhere between 40 000 to 70 000 years, Indigenous Australia possesses a Pleistocene² past that penetrates geo-

logical time (Griffiths, 2000, 25). Australia's "deep-running currents" of terrestrial time (Braudel, 1980, 3) echo ancient Indigenous narratives, alien to the colonising population.

Traditional Aboriginal philosophy and spirituality are grounded in autochthonous concepts, where the essence of life is held to be located in the land. Aboriginal thinker Mary Graham tells us that in an Aboriginal worldview "the land is the law" because it is "a sacred entity", it is "the great mother of all humanity" (2008, 181) — "all meaning comes from land" (2008, 182).

It is not only ethics and law that manifest autochthonously in Aboriginal Australia, but an entire spiritual system sustained through kinship and ritual. The Aboriginal Dreaming locates the beginnings of life in the soil. This eloquent spiritual tale tells of Creator Beings who arose from under the ground as humans were sleeping in embryonic form. These enormous creatures fought, danced, ran, made love and killed all over the country and their vibrant activity shaped the contours of the Australian landscape. Wherever they travelled, they left tracks, traces and signatures of themselves in geographic forms. When the humans awoke these beings taught them the "Laws of custodianship of land, the Laws of kinship, of marriage, of correct ceremonies" (Graham, 2008, 107). Once their work was

complete these Ancestral Beings sank "back in" — or else they transformed themselves into topographical features — petrified to rock, or metamorphosed into trees and waterholes. These sites are revered as sacred — of continuing teaching and power.

Aboriginal Elder George Tinamin's (1993, 4) words express the intimate connection between Aboriginal people and landscape features:

One Land, One Law, One People

This is not a rock, it is my grandfather

This is a place where the Dreaming comes up, right up from inside the ground.

This sacred connection to the land poses significant threat to non-Aboriginal Australian belonging and sovereignty within the Australian nation. Indigenous Australian scholar Aileen Moreton Robinson (2003, 31) has argued that white Australians simply cannot achieve such autochthonous connection with the country and that Aboriginal belonging is ontologically incommensurate with settler belonging:

Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous. This ontological relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share, and which cannot be shared, with the postcolonial subject whose sense of belonging in this place is tied to migrancy.

As a means of combating the threat of an exclusive Aboriginal connection to land, settler Australian cultural imaginaries have often positioned Aboriginal culture and spirituality as an antiquated relic of the nation's pre-settlement history. Like the ancient granite forms of the New England landscape, Aboriginality has been petrified into the geological depths of time. This negates the continuity of

Indigenous identity in modern Australia, and enacts a form of cultural *Terra Nullius*.

Terra Nullius was the legal fiction that enabled British colonisers to take possession of Aboriginal land. The doctrine declared that Australia was an "empty continent" belonging to no one prior to its colonial settlement in 1788. Under this delusion, "Aboriginal people were vanquished, yet not vanquished" (David, Langton, McNiven, 2002, 35) as *Terra Nullius* declared that no one had been conquered and therefore there was no one to contest the appropriation of Aboriginal land. The silencing of Indigenous rights and sovereignty enabled the myth of settler Australian's as "first possessors" to be consummated.

The doctrine of *Terra Nullius* was overturned in law following the Mabo decision of 1992. In the High Court case of *Mabo and others v The State of Queensland* Indigenous people of the Murray Islands were determined to retain title to their land that had been annexed to the colony of Queensland in 1879. This established native title in common law (David, Langton, McNiven, 2002, 35). Despite this, overhangs of the *Terra Nullius* doctrine persist in Australian society. The denial of Indigenous sovereignty is ongoing as the nation is continually reproduced, materially, ideologically, and discursively, as a "white possession" (Moreton-Robinson, 2007, 9).

New England's rock forms provide a rough granular surface onto which contested claims of sovereignty can be carved. These autochthonous creatures embody the engravings of a settler society attempting to appropriate an indigenous provenance by sculpting the landscape into colonial cultural forms.

Bluff Rock

Bluff Rock is a grey, ghostly cliff that looms over the New England highway. It is the alleged site of an Aboriginal massacre where a tribe of Aboriginal people were slaughtered by a small group of colonial settlers in 1844. Historian I.C. Campbell (cited in Blomfield,



Fig. 4. Bluff Rock, Tenterfield

1981, 79) documented the incident, where, after being chased across the tableland countryside, a group of Aboriginal people fled to Bluff Rock:

The Aborigines withdrew to high ground until they found themselves between a precipice and their pursuers. The entire group, men, women and children were driven over the edge...

Australia's early history is scarred by the slaughter of Aboriginal people that continued throughout the nation until the 1920s. The Bluff Rock Massacre is by no means an isolated incident, yet the legend of Bluff Rock enacts a form of spatio-temporal demarcation, negating the far reaching impact of colonial violence.

The Tenterfield Visitors Information Sheet (n.d., 1) tells us that the truth of the Bluff Rock Massacre "will be forever in the bosom of one of the most impressive landmarks along the New England Highway". Here the granite outcrop secures a shameful history

as rock functions as poetic metaphor for the containment of the massacre:

Bluff Rock stands above the surrounding area because it has been more resistant to erosion, probably due to having fewer cracks along which water can penetrate and accelerate the erosion process.

History and geology rhyme in this tourist dialogue as the narrative "presumes a fossilised past, a past that cannot change, a past that we cannot change" (Schlunke, 2005, 35).

Katrina Schlunke (2005) in her profound and extensive work, *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*, argues that the Bluff Rock narrative acknowledges Australia's brutal beginning while simultaneously disavowing it. Terror is trapped at the top of the Bluff, incarcerated in the abrasive surface of a granite ancient. This produces unaccountability in the contemporary Australian population, who are conveniently distanced from the crimes of the past. Schlunke (2005, 122) writes:



Fig. 5. Thunderbolt's Rock, Uralla

How useful and how “practical” to believe that that is where it all happened. And if we do not think of the cottages and the paddocks and the neatly organised cattle, we will never remember the cars and the roads and the reservations and the barristers and the cities which made the systematic dispossession and dispersal of Aboriginal people possible. That is far away.

This spatio-temporal encysting of settlement violence to a particular landscape site is common in colonial narratives. By restricting the foundational trauma of the nation to a geographically contained past, the continuity of Aboriginal identity and culture that threatens non-Aboriginal sovereignty is circumvented.

Thunderbolt's Rock

Connected to the marginalisation of Aboriginal presence in the landscape are mythic tales of Australia's early settlement begin-

nings, also sculpted into tableland granite. Thunderbolt's Rock is a collection of large granite tors on the outskirts of the small New England township, Uralla. This mnemonic landscape feature reifies a romanticised colonial narrative that obscures the uncomfortable violence of colonisation.

The rock is a tangible marker of colonial memory celebrating the life of legendary nineteenth century bushranger, Captain Thunderbolt, a.k.a., Frederick Ward. Alleged to be the vantage point for Ward's renowned coach robberies (Uralla Visitors Information Centre, n.d, 1), the rock evokes the drama of Australia's early pioneering history, consolidating the mythic position of the bushranger in the nation's foundational narrative.

The life of Thunderbolt has inspired a prolific myth-making process “as lines blur between historicity and the imaginative mass of further fictions” (Ryan, 2006, 299). Captain Thunderbolt began his life as Frederick Wordsworth Ward in Wilberforce, NSW in the early 19th century. The son of a convict,

Ward had his first encounter with the law at the age of twenty when he was convicted of stealing 75 horses and sentenced to ten years hard labour at Cockatoo Island prison in Sydney Harbour. Following his release, he continued his life of crime, committing over 200 offences across the northern section of NSW before being gunned down by Constable Alexander Walker during a highway robbery on the 25 May 1870 (Visitors Information Centre, n.d., 1–2).

John S. Ryan emphasises that Thunderbolt “has long since moved from a figure of history to one of folkloric stature, a victim of informers and magisterial injustice. Forced into ‘cross’ ways, he became something of a Robin Hood, righting the wrongs done to the poor” (2006, 299). This bushranger legend provides a “safe” history for the New England region, a nostalgic representation of the founding of the nation (Edelheim, 2007, 139). Jonah Edelheim, in his analysis of Thunderbolt’s role in tourism, notes that “Thunderbolt is strongly connected to a larger national appeal to romanticise non-Aboriginal history in rural areas” (2007, 128). He argues that through the manipulation of colonial memory, focus on figures such as Thunderbolt create a “touristic terra nullius” (2007, 175) by recording the region’s history “from the first signs of non-Aboriginal influence in an area, and [relegating] Indigenous history to [the status of] nature” (2007, 160).

Thunderbolt’s Rock inscribes cultural Terra Nullius into the New England landscape. In myth Thunderbolt is evoked as a colonial ancestor whose blood has stained Australian soil. The rock marks his place in time and holds his spirit. He is embodied in the crust of the earth.

This myth is part of the production of what Rob Garbutt has described as “white autochthony”. Autochthony is an essentialist claim of authenticity supposing a “magical” relationship with land (Garbutt, 2006b, 4). Garbutt observes that autochthony is a

particularly compelling concept for colonial societies as new arrivals seek to naturalise their place in Antipodean country and “become unmarked: the natives born to the nation, the locals” (Garbutt, 2006b, 6). In a mixing of flesh, dirt and stone, poetic Nativism is granted to colonial migrants through the imagined autochthonous provenance “of a seed planted, of being a child of the soil, of coming from a place as distinct from the womb” (Garbutt, 2005, para. 10).

The practice of white autochthony relies on the colonial aesthetic of *Terra Nullius* where settlers are positioned as first possessors, rather than migrants. Through the disappearance of Aboriginality from Australia’s foundational narratives and colonial landscapes, autochthonous connection is usurped as settlers inscribe their own cultures and myths into Indigenous Australian landscapes.

The Australian Standing Stones

The Australian Standing Stones is a collection of 24 granite monoliths in an arrangement to celebrate the Celtic foundations of the nation. Erected in Glen Innes (Population: 5944), the stones are a tourist attraction for this small tableland community. Through their combination of local material, ancient myth and Eucalypt surrounds the Australian Standing Stones evidence an attempt at settler indigenisation.

It is significant that local granite has been used to construct the monument. While the arrangement echoes Stonehenge and is based on the Ring of Brodgar³, the indigenous provenance of the stones enacts an autochthonous resurrection of Celtic history and myth. Rooted in New England soil, and made from granite collected in a 50 km radius of Glen Innes, the ancient monoliths punctuate the landscape like the letters of a creolised language.

The stones reproduce the Australian nation as a white possession by glorifying an exclusive Anglo-Celtic myth of origin. In the



Fig. 6. *The Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes*

tourist dialogue the Standing Stones are the physical manifestation of Celtic rights to the land based on a claim of first settlement. Glen Innes' Tourism's *Guide to the Australian Standing Stones* declares that the stones "reflect Glen Innes' heritage where the first settlers, largely Scots, arrived in 1838" (N.D, 1). Connell and Rugendyke in their analysis of the Standing Stones as a tourist attraction observe that Glen Innes has "chosen a specific period of history of regional significance, and exulted in it. In doing so it has excluded other historical periods, along with other settlers of non-Celtic heritage" (2010, 99).

It is noteworthy that Indigenous Australians also produced stone arrangements constructed from local granite throughout the New England tableland region. In 1963, local archaeologist Isabel McBryde reported on a series of Stone Arrangements discovered near the Serpentine River in the Ebor district, noting that "the systematic arrangement of stones, either in cairns, mounds, or in ordered patterned lines" was "part of the living traditions of the tribes concerned" (1974, 137). These sites were often sacred Bora

grounds⁴ or initiation grounds (1974, 138).

The importation of a Celtic stone arrangement that harvests local granite is a denigration of the little known, barely understood, Indigenous history. So it is that Glen Innes trumps Kindatchy — an Aboriginal for the region meaning "plenty of stones"; and the lands of the Ngarabal people are best known for simulacra of a Northern Hemisphere Neolithic monument. Stone is reshaped into Celtic motifs, and the Bora ground stamped out by the geometries of post-settlement colonial amnesia. The monument obscures the Australian Indigenous ancient in favour of a symbolic and tenuous link to a geographically distant Celtic mythology.

The uncomfortable collision between the resurrection of a distant Celtic sacred and the notion of an Aboriginal sacred inherent in the land is assuaged in the Publicity Notes of the Standing Stones by adopting the legal conceptualisation of the Aboriginal Sacred:

It is important to note that the Australis Stone was originally intended to be a stone for the Australian Aborigines, suitably named. The local Land Council was approached, and the matter discussed,

an invitation being extended to them to be involved. After deliberations amongst themselves, they agreed, only to withdraw later. They did assure us, however, that we were not encroaching on any sacred site and wished us well.

(Cited in Ryan & Tregurtha, 1992, 72)

The demarcation of Aboriginal sacred sites has become a prominent issue in post-Mabo Australia. Since the Mabo decision of 1992 overturned the legal fiction of *Terra Nullius*, the Aboriginal sacred has been inextricably linked to land rights claims. That the Standing Stones were erected just four months before the landmark Native Title Act of 1993 codified Native Title recognition in law highlights the politically contested context they occupy.

The encysting of the Aboriginal sacred to contained sites can be understood as a hegemonic cultural process that spatially marginalises Aboriginal identity in the landscape. The Standing Stones thus function in a similar way to Bluff Rock demarcating designated landscape areas for Aboriginal remembrance and inhabitation so white sovereignty can prevail elsewhere.

Upside-down autochthony

When John Oxley exclaimed that New England was “an upside-down land” he was referring to the sheer strangeness of its geography. But Oxley’s logic of inversion — an upside-down vision of Alpine peaks — also resonates with the cultural practices of settler culture. Just as explorers climbed grand summits and raised flags to stake claims over terrestrial lands, Australian colonisers dug deep into the pre-settlement past, mining strata’s of ancient rock for sovereign belonging. As this poetic resource was narrated into colonial mythology, a carnivalesque manoeuvre turned autochthonous Indigenous claims upside down. In a “peculiar logic” of the “inside out” or the “turnabout” (Bakhtin, 1968, 11) Anglo-Celtic settler culture came to be

regarded as the “real” and first Australian nation, supplanting Aboriginal autochthony. In this inverted landscape of trepidatious gorge country and erupting molten rock forms of a primeval past, culture operates as if in the midst of a carnival, twirling around in “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order” (Bakhtin, 1968, 10) of Indigenous Australia.

In order to adjust this distorted logic and to put the land back on its feet, the carnival needs to come to a close. Scholar Denis Byrne has argued that one way of achieving this is for Australian archaeology to “rise to the surface” (1996, 102). Byrne argues that post colonial Australian archaeology need not locate itself in the deep geological recesses of a buried Indigenous past because Aboriginality is alive in the present, and explorations of post-contact traces could explore that “relatively horizontal... space or terrain... where duration is measured in generations (lifetimes) rather than millennia” (Byrne, 1996, 102). By refusing to locate an “authentic Aboriginality” underground, the sequestering of Indigenous identity to a pre-colonial past could be countered and subverted by local Indigenous people. This would also undermine the carnivalesque logic that allows for claims of white autochthony to appropriate indigenous connections to land. In “rising to the surface”, space is emphasised rather than time. This is a history of routes, rather than roots, a history that can be viewed “as a process of *migrations* rather than as *settlement*” (Garbutt, 2006a, 183).

Rob Garbutt has observed that settler Australians have no language for perceiving their arrival as migration. The migrant is always the Other that came after from somewhere else (2008, 179). In Australia’s colonial myths of origin, autochthony evidences the value of “ontological” being over “dislocated, migratory being” (Garbutt, 2008, 185). Jacques Derrida defined ontology as “axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological

value of present-being [on] to its *situation*, to the stable, and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of a territory, native soil" (Derrida, 1994, 82). In the aesthetic of Australian settlement, the new migrant is considered to be lesser than the ontopoligically grounded white Australian.

The similarities between "boat people" arriving on Australian shores now and the ones that settled in the late 18th century are vehemently denied in dominant Australia cultural discourse. The new refugee produces an anxiety in contemporary Australia by reminding non-Indigenous settler Australians that "others can become Australians by arriving and staying" (Schlunke, 2002, para. 11). The language of "white autochthony" obscures this sameness and makes hospitality and welcome of the migrant impossible.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls for the abandonment of cultural autochthony arguing that it represents the triumph of essentialist ontology's over ethical relations with others. Compassion towards the Other, according to Levinas, relies on a generous spirit of hospitality. He writes "no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home" (Levinas, 1969, 172).

Levinas argues that the adoption of hospitality necessarily disturbs autochthony, allowing the home to become an instrument for ethical encounter with the other, rather than a weapon of exclusion. He writes, "[t]he chosen home is the very opposite of a root" (1969, 172). To be rooted is to be firmly planted in a place of origin, to have grown out of the soil, to be autochthonous. For Levinas, the hospitable home is the antithesis of autochthony, a place that "indicates a disengagement, a wandering (errance)" (1969, 172). A wandering spirit of exile is shared with the guest/Other who "has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons" (Levinas, 1991, 91). In Levinas's conception, these empathic, ethi-

cal relations with the Other are *not possible* while claims of autochthony endure.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that New England's rock forms have become a site for settler claims of autochthony and essentialist connection to the land. This is problematic as it relies on the disappearance of Australian Aboriginal sovereignty and spiritual claims to sacredness within the landscape. Aboriginal culture is encysted into specific and delimited spatio-temporal borders, circumventing the threat of the spectral presence of Aboriginal identity and the foundational violence of the Australian nation.

Post-settlement claims of autochthony not only deny Indigenous presence enacting a form of cultural Terra Nullius, but also rely on a limited concept of belonging that excludes settlers of non-Anglo Celtic origin. This has important socio-political ramifications as Australia struggles to deal with border-security issues and migration. The panic over "boat people" in Australian politics can be seen in part as a reflection of the narrow definition of Australian belonging and the limitations of an autochthonous discourse on Australia's multicultural policy.

I have proposed an ethic of "surface thinking" as a possible combatant to "white autochthony", requiring a revision of claims of settlement, to a vision of ongoing migrations. Away from the binary of Indigene and Coloniser is the rich diversity that frames Australia's narratives. At the official opening ceremony for the Standing Stones monument, Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair made an intriguing observation. He said:

I wonder as I see these New England granite stones, whether people visiting the site in two to three thousand years time will understand their origins — or whether the same mystery will surround them as it does with Stonehenge and the Ring of Brodgar. And are these stones

likely to outlive all other evidence of our civilisation in centuries to come, as have other Standing Stones of previous centuries?

(Cited in Ryan and Tregurtha, 1992, 76)

The projected future indecipherability of the stones is metonymy here for the transience of contemporary culture and identity. No matter how literal the reification, in this case the metamorphosis of myth into carved granite, the present is a moment in motion, always vulnerable to obscurity and disappearance in the future. While landscapes are containers of time, they do not hold it still.

In emphasising ethical interactions with diverse and plural Others, we can move away from the fixed temporality of autochthony into a realm of mobile hospitality and welcome, where stories could dance lightly across the country, moving in rhythm with others' stories, and leaving open landscape spaces for dialogue, connection and hospitality.



Fig. 7. Engravings on the Australian Standing Stones, Glen Innes

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Notes

¹ The European sacralisation of mountains continues ancient traditions which linked earthly terrain to the sublime. Mountains have been considered by diverse cultures as sacred, providing connections between the highest tips of the earth to cosmic, transcendental power (See Eliade, 1987, 36–47).

² The Pleistocene Epoch was between 1.8 million to 11 550 years ago. Skeletal remains have been dated to establish Aboriginal occupation of Australia many thousands of years into the Pleistocene era.

³ The Ring of Brodgar is a Neolithic stone ring in the Orkney Islands.

⁴ Bora Grounds are Aboriginal ceremonial sites that often also function as meeting places. They have spiritual significance to Indigenous people.