

A Place in Stories: A Report on the Literature of Tasmania Subset of the AustLit Database

Tony Stagg and Philip Mead

This is a preliminary report on an experiment within an AustLit database subset about the literary representation of place. The Literature of Tasmania subset is one of the regionally or sub-nationally defined research communities of the AustLit database. From the beginning the subset team was aware of numerous definitional complexities of regional bibliographical work, including the question of regional and subregional descriptors and the taxonomy of spatial terms within existing database structure. As we undertook more extensive indexing, though, new patterns in the spatial markers of colonial and modern literary publications have emerged. The subset team has worked with the methodology of the database and the subset structure to design quantitative categories that begin to enable analysis of various spatial markers—like Composition Place, Place of Publication, thematic spatial reference.

The original vision of the subset was to identify a body of literature by its geopolitical parameters. And then to record it bibliographically. The model here was Cheryl Taylor's pioneering work with the Writing the Tropical North subset. On the face of it, this aim might appear easier for Tasmania than any other 'region' of Australia, given that Tasmania is the only conventionally geographically defined region, colony or state. All the

other regions have latitudinal, meridian or cadastral boundaries as well as geographical ones. Islands and continents are natural and indivisible; states, provinces and territories are historical and geopolitically contingent. More theoretically, the subset is motivated by a kind of critical regionalism that draws the specific, the singular, the (imagined and historical) places of literary texts and locational perspectives on authors, oeuvres, production and reception to the centre of critical attention.¹ As such, it is part of a disciplinary trajectory that emphasises the locational singularities of literary texts and their production; new knowledge about Australian literature as Katherine Bode expresses it.² This is a direction, perhaps, counter to the other axis of empirical research and quantitative methodology represented by the AustLit database: the ambition to be comprehensive about the ‘collective [literary] system’ (as Moretti expresses it [quoted in Bode, p. 186]). The Literature of Tasmania spatialisation project suggests the way a bibliographical version of the ‘collective system’ might be used to identify patterns in specific locational representations.

There is a well-recognised, and rhetorically complex, thematics of islandness that the literature of Tasmania contributes to, with one point of origin in Abel Tasman’s map of 1642 and its inclusion in a speculative, fantastic map as a frontispiece to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). The back-story to this history of insularisation haunts the litera-

¹ ‘Critical regionalism’ is a term from Gayatri Spivak, who uses it to describe her activist academic work in a more purely political context of North-South differences but who nevertheless understands there is no ‘clear-cut distinction between self-determination and nationalism, [between] regionalism and nationalism’. See Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (London: Seagull, 2007), p. 214.

² Katherine Bode, ‘Beyond the Colonial Present: Quantitative Analysis, “Resourceful Reading” and Australian Literary Studies’, *JASAL Special Issue: The Colonial Present* (2008): 194.

ture of Tasmania in various ways: Van Diemen's Land (as it was for more than 200 years, longer than it has been Tasmania) has not always been an island, in geological time, or Aboriginal time, or even in European maritime history (there's every reason to think Tasman believed his Van Diemen's Land was part of a large southern landmass). As late as the bicentennial of white settlement in 2003/04 the Premier Jim Bacon was complicating Tasmania's history of insularity, and sense of place, by referring to it as an archipelago of one large island surrounded by 300 other islands. The asynchronous history of Tasmania's insularisation, its representation in the pre-discovery European imagination and its cartographical history all inflect the representation of Tasmania.

Van Diemen's Land became Tasmania, officially, in January 1856 and after the cessation of transportation, but our sample indexing of pre-1855 newspapers suggests that the idea of Tasmania, as a place, was widely shared by the colonial population from at least twenty years earlier.³ The further indexing of these newspapers using the spatial categories of the subset would allow us to chart more extensively this consciousness of place, an unexpected result of our research in Tasmanian literature. The mapping of a spatial consciousness as represented in a geopolitically

³ See, for example, J.S., 'Lines to Tasmania', *Hobart Town Magazine* 2 (12 February 1834): 306–07:

A song for the land where the kangaroo bounds—
A song for the land which the ocean surrounds,
Where the hills are so green, and the vales are so fair,
That the emigrant gazes with boundless delight,
As the shores of Tasmania rise on his sight ...

Rapid is the progress Tasmania has made
By science and commerce uniting their aid,
But the dawn of her glory is scarcely begun,
Like the eagle, she'll soar with her eyes on the sun;
Till Britain her likeness shall marvel to see,
And Europe acknowledge the land of the free.

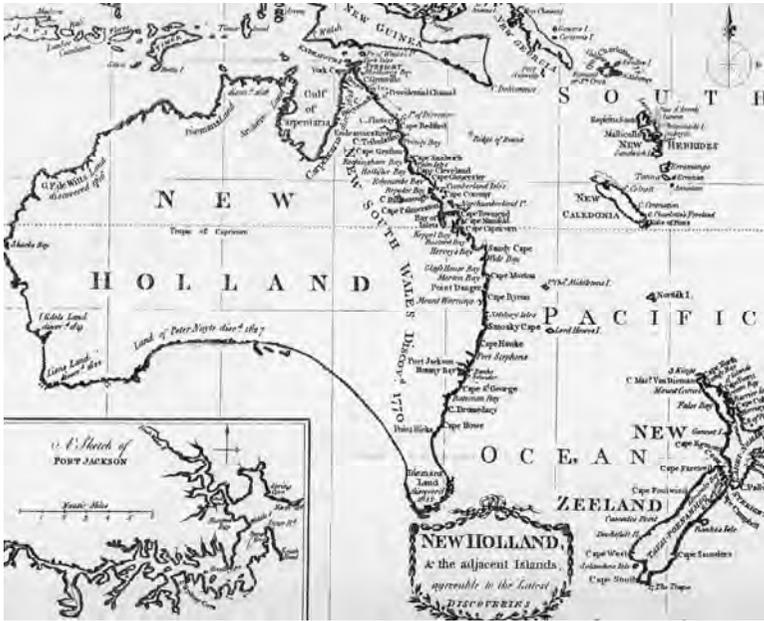


Figure 1 Map of New Holland by T. Kincade, 1790 (R.V. Tooley plate XIV)

defined set of literary texts is reliant, then, on theoretical perspectives, historical inflections, database methodologies and limitations, visualisation technologies, cognitive mapping and insider knowledge. The space that constitutes Tasmania is easier to imagine from the outside than to define spatially from within.

During the three years of compiling the Tasmanian subset for AustLit, we have encountered many strange appropriations of the island; from Bessie Marchant's bucolic interpretation of the Southwest Wilderness in her 1908 children's story *The Apple Lady*, to Nevil Shute's creative reinventions of the West Coast in *The Rainbow and the Rose* (1958), to Candice Proctor's convict romance *Whispers of Heaven* (2001), to 1970s rock star Graham Parker's rediscovery of the Tasmanian Tiger in *The*

Other Life of Brian (2003). Marchant never left England, but conducted her research on exotic locations through various libraries, including the Bodleian in Oxford. Her source material generated some interesting results. In *The Apple Lady*, two of Marchant’s characters trek—stroll really—through the Southwest from Port Davey to Mount Picton, stopping off for the night at a town called Craycroft. There is no town called Craycroft, indeed there are no towns in Southwest Tasmania at all. Yet for Marchant, the town existed because it appeared on a map in Walch’s *Almanac*. For years, Walch’s *Tasmanian Almanacs* included a map of the state that displayed not only existing towns but also gazetted settlements. These ‘towns’ were habitations planned for the future. Craycroft was one



Figure 2 The ‘Town’ of Craycroft, just to the Right of the Arthur Range (Walch’s *Tasmanian Almanac*, 1896)



Figure 3 Butlers Gorge Town Site (Google Maps)

such place. The fact that the location was wilderness, and still is, meant nothing to Marchant. Craycroft perfectly suited the narrative requirements of her story.

If Craycroft never existed, Butlers Gorge, by contrast, only exists as a memory and as a place in a story. Enter the term ‘Butlers Gorge’ into an online mapping resource and you’ll be presented with a location somewhere in the Tasmanian Central Highlands, near Lake King William. Zooming in a little closer reveals Clark Dam and a canal (leading to Tarraleah). But this isn’t Butlers Gorge. Careful examination of the surrounding area reveals the spectral gridlines of an abandoned settlement.

This is the trace of a town—a hydroelectric construction village that flourished between 1940 and 1955 when the last residents left and the site was slowly rehabilitated. Butlers Gorge now exists as a memory, and as an important setting for Richard Flanagan’s novel *The Sound of One Hand*

Clapping (1997). As such, this 'ghost town' represents a significant Tasmanian literary site.

This phantom that is Butlers Gorge raises other issues concerning spatial representation: how to indicate places that may have otherwise been forgotten? Butlers Gorge exists in memory and in the fiction of Richard Flanagan (and others) but there are numerous other sites which now exist only in words—old mining and logging camps, other hydro construction villages, subsumed farms, huts in the forest—all of which are difficult or impossible to locate on any map or database. Representing such places requires a creative and flexible approach to the integration of other datasets. Beneath conventional geography lies a phantom map, filled with ghostly spaces of literary significance.⁴

Indexing the textual material that constitutes the Tasmanian subset has entailed determining and ascribing specific settings to particular works: spatial indicators enabling users to trace works by place. This indexing process is often not entirely straightforward. In its physical area Tasmania may only be 63,000 square kilometres, but it contains numerous micro-regions, the dimensions of which exist beyond the scope of conventional geography. These regions are often fluid and organic, rather than fixed, as they are produced by a lived sense of place rather than topographical features alone. They may also be sensitive to historical shifts.

Any credible understanding of literary geography is not necessarily predicated upon easily established and visible boundaries. Such understanding is often very subjective as it derives from a lived sense of place. The kinds of cognitive maps we all carry around with us generate literary

⁴For a spatialised reading of Tasmanian mining and hydro towns in relation to their dereliction and absence, see Elizabeth McMahon, 'Wasted Memory and Generational History: Tasmania's Abandoned Places', in Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas, eds, *Women Making Time: Contemporary Feminist Critique and Cultural Analysis* (Perth: UWA Press, 2006), pp. 43–61.

geographies. A database, however, requires more tangible parameters. One of the challenges of the Literature of Tasmania subset project has been to translate what are in fact collectively produced cognitive maps into more concrete spatial definitions. When we refer to the literature of Tasmania's West Coast, for instance, we aren't referring literally to works produced on the coastline. Virtually no one lives on the actual West Coast; the main settlements are inland but the term 'West Coast' has become the accepted regional designation for anything that emanates 'from the west'.⁵

Part of our project led to a reconsideration of the AustLit spatial thesaurus in relation to its representation of Tasmania and to our modifying it in accordance with our interpretation of Tasmanian regionality. This led us into a re-examination of local taxonomies of place. For the purposes of the AustLit Tasmanian subset, we eventually considered the following spatial taxonomy the most appropriate:

Tasmanian Subset Regions

- Bass Strait Islands
- Central Highlands
- East Coast
- Macquarie Island
- Midlands
- Northeast Tasmania
- Northwest Tasmania
- Southeast Tasmania

⁵ European exploration invariably moved west from a line between the major colonial settlements of Launceston in the north and Hobart in the south, as the eastern regions of the island were more readily accessible from the early days of settlement. In *Explorers of Western Tasmania*, Binks illustrates how, in the colonial imagination, most of Tasmania was west. C.J. Binks, *Explorers of Western Tasmania* (Devonport, Tas.: Taswegia, 1989), p. xii.

- Southwest Tasmania
- Van Diemen's Land (1803–56)
- Western Tasmania (including the West Coast)

In the taxonomy these terms serve as subregions of Tasmania; layers beneath this level contain micro-regions such as the Derwent Valley, the Fingal Valley, the Northern and Southern Midlands and the Far North-West; these in turn contain specific places. We are not suggesting that any of these spatial terms rather than regional determinations are set in stone. At some future date other researchers may choose to vary the boundaries of inclusion, or to create entirely new regions. For the purposes of the current project, however, this arrangement is satisfactory.

One particular research outcome that drove this spatial reorganisation arose from certain textual elements that presented themselves while we were indexing, aside from the spatial subjects relative to the setting of individual works. These spatial elements had more to do with production and composition than with thematic or referential content. While indexing various issues of nineteenth-century newspapers, in particular the *Tasmanian Mail*, we noticed that some items of poetry and prose contained additional published information, relating to their place of composition. In consideration of the ways in which future researchers may be able to use this information, we sought ways to incorporate it usefully into the dataset. We accomplished this through the use of the Composition Place node, thus generating a further spatial dataset, offering new perspectives on the relationship between text and place.

While regions exhibit parameters that are inherently flexible, spatial data are also subject to and influenced by historical change: the name of a particular place may undergo a series of changes over time. The challenge is to be able to record historically specific spatial data in order to track how the terms of this dataset change in relation to changes in spatial nominations. For instance, the spatial designation 'Tasmania' occurs very early in local colonial literature, and is well established long before the

nomenclature of Van Diemen's Land is officially abandoned. Similarly, it would be useful to chart the literary evolution of Hobart Town through Hobart to its current incarnation of Hobart. Other places also offer interesting case studies. After 1877, Port Arthur briefly transforms into Carnarvon before reverting to its original designation, convict baggage and all. A number of works bearing the Composition Place 'Carnarvon' occur during this period. In the dataset these redundant names may be absorbed under the synonym 'Port Arthur', yet it is of historical significance—and of value in terms of future research—to note their deviation in provenance.

Most of our work over the past three years has been dedicated to compiling the core of the Tasmanian subset. The sheer depth and scope of this core has meant that our work has allowed us less time than we would have liked to consider broader issues concerning the representation of literary geographies. Such questions of spatial interpretation have arisen, along with many others, throughout the course of this process; however, they remain largely issues for future researchers to ponder. How does one represent ephemeral and transient places in a dataset? What information that is not now considered to be bibliographically standard might be of significance for future researchers? Consideration needs to be given to compiling a dataset that presents the maximum potential for future research outcomes. We should also add that these are not issues or questions that are unique to the Tasmanian subset; indeed they apply to any project attempting to translate such abstract concepts into some form of tangible and accessible data.