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"IN MARGINS AND IN LONGINGS...":
THE BEACH IN AUSTRALIAN LIFE AND LITERATURE

L. F. HUNTSMAN
A thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English University of Sydney
© August 1998
The incorporation of the beach into Australian culture is pictorially represented in Toni Robertson's *Canberra Beaches*. 
ABSTRACT

This study had its origin in a simple question: why has the beach not been as prominent in Australian literature as the bush? “The beach” is defined by modifying the Jungian notion of archetype, while insights derived from Freudian theory enable engagement with the question of the beach’s appeal and also suggest themes which illuminate subsequent discussion of writings and cultural phenomena.

Reasons why the bush has been accorded greater significance in Australian literature than the beach are suggested and explored in Chapter One. The role of writers in developing representations of Australian identity which draw on ideas associated with the bush is discussed, and an apparent lack of literary influence on the incorporation of the beach into Australian culture is considered.

Chapter Two presents a history of the way a distinctively Australian beach came into being in order to establish whether or not depictions of the beach in literature reflect its significance in Australian life. Australian writing which refers or relates to the beach is then surveyed and analysed. References to the beach in writing from the early days of settlement are noted in Chapter Three, where differences are discerned between nineteenth-century and twentieth-century works while themes of enduring importance are also identified. Chapter Four examines more diverse and recent works and attempts an assessment of the place of the beach in Australian literature.

Chapters Five and Six argue that influences of the beach are manifest in Australian culture. Ways in which the experience of the beach has altered those who live here are analysed, and implications for the future of Australian society suggested.

The role of literature in articulating a culture’s notion of itself is scrutinised; themes of interest in our cultural history are identified and explored; and ideas about the process of cultural adaptation to a new land are presented.
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First and foremost, my supervisor, Associate Professor Adrian Mitchell. Combining encouragement and unfailing interest with rigorous standards and high expectations, he has been everything one could hope for in a supervisor.

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I am also grateful to Geoffrey Legge of the Watters Gallery, agent for Toni Robertson, artist, for permission to reproduce her Canberra Beaches silkscreen prints, and to Baker & McKenzie for permission to photograph these engaging works.

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my uncles, Bill and Jack ("Sharkbait") Butterfield, Bondi lifesavers and my childhood heroes; and to Australia’s beaches, where so many of the ideas explored herein suggested themselves to me.

Leone Huntsman
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PREFACE

This study began with a teasing question: why has the bush featured so much more prominently in Australian literature than the beach? Preference for the bush in our literature seems to belie the facts of Australian life. With respect to accessibility to bush or beach, seventy per cent of the population live in what has become known as the eastern beach zone (east of the Great Dividing Range) while less than one per cent live in the interior; the fastest growing area of Australia in terms of population is along the strip of beaches from the north coast of New South Wales to the Sunshine Coast of Queensland.\(^1\) Many walk in the bush and go inland for their holidays; but many more look to the beach for relaxation and pleasure. People who live near a beach go on holidays to another beach. On Good Friday 1989, almost a quarter of a million people gathered on Bondi beach for a “Turn back the Tide” concert, staged to protest against the pollution of Sydney’s beaches\(^2\) - far more than have ever attended a rally to protest against forests being logged or wild rivers being dammed.

The organisers had hoped for a crowd of fifty thousand; how could they have predicted the huge attendance on that day? While one might have suspected a widespread attachment amounting to a passion for the beach among Australians, any such passion has largely been unexpressed. Somehow it has been easier to put love of the Australian landscape - “the bush” - into words; perhaps we were trained for it from the time we learnt “My Country” at school:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ love a sunburnt country,} \\
A & \text{ land of sweeping plains,} \\
Of & \text{ ragged mountain ranges,} \\
Of & \text{ droughts and flooding rains.} \\
I & \text{ love her far horizons,} \\
I & \text{ love her jewel sea,} \\
Her & \text{ beauty and her terror -} \\
The & \text{ wide brown land for me!}
\end{align*}
\]

One mention of the “jewel sea”; none of the beach. And lest it be thought that


Dorothea Mackellar’s poem, published in 1908, is merely a relic from a bygone age, “I Am Australian”, a song which has rapidly become popular in the last couple of years, expresses very similar sentiments, summarised in the last of its five verses:

I’m the hot wind from the desert  
I’m the black soil of the plains  
I’m the mountains and the valleys  
I’m the drought and flooding rains  
I am the rock, I am the sky  
The rivers when they run  
The spirit of this great land  
I am Australian.

The words of the song “I am Australian”, now a popular item at naturalisation ceremonies and other patriotic occasions, retain the dominant presence of the bush and continue to omit the beach.

The question posed at the beginning of this preface crystallised on reading Geoffrey Dutton’s Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand - The Myth of the Beach, in which he pointed to the pervasiveness of the bush myth despite the “dominant tradition in Australian life” of the beach; but he appeared to blame what he judged to be the “bad literary image [of the beach] in Australia” on “a moral aversion to the hedonism of the beach” among Australian writers.

It seemed probable that the truth was more complicated than that, and that an investigation of the portrayal of the beach in Australian literature was necessary in order to test these generalisations.

Because there has been so little discussion of the beach from a literary perspective, it seems desirable first to lay the groundwork for discussion by reflecting on two basic questions. What is meant by ‘the beach’, as the term is used here? And what is the reason for the deep appeal of the beach - for the concern which motivated that quarter of a million people to assemble on Bondi beach, and the attraction which leads children to run so joyfully to the edge of the waves? Insights derived from psychoanalytic theory not only provide ways of engaging with these questions, but

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suggest themes which illuminate discussion of writings and cultural phenomena further into the study. Since these ideas connect with much that follows, they are presented in an Introduction which is preliminary and preparatory to succeeding chapters.

As inevitably happens, dealing directly or exclusively with the question which prompted this investigation proved impossible: one question only led to another. The search for answers was like trying to trace a path back to its source, only to find the track petering out, becoming confused, taking unexpected turns, criss-crossing with other tracks. First, the case that the bush is more prominent in Australian literature than the beach needed to be established on the basis of substantial investigation rather than impressions - mine or Dutton's. And since the stimulus for this study came from a perceived contrast between the prominence accorded the bush and the beach by our writers, there was also a need to study the relationship between "representation" and "reality" in the case of the bush. If the bush has been accorded a significance in literature beyond what might be expected from its actual direct influence on the lives of most Australians, what are the reasons for this?

In the case of the beach, it became apparent that in attempting to assess whether or not writers have underestimated the importance of the beach in Australian life, one needs to ask: what, in fact, does history tell us about the role of the beach in Australian life? Only after investigation of this question is it possible to look again at the relationship between representation and reality, this time in the case of the beach, and to attempt to deal with other questions. Has the representation of the beach in literature reflected its significance in the lives of Australians? If one of the functions of literature is to represent the life of a people to itself and to others, and if there has been, or is currently, a discrepancy between that representation and the reality it purports to depict, what are the reasons for this? What does the portrayal of the beach by Australian writers tell us about our changing culture?

Having considered these issues in relation to the bush and the beach, a further question presents itself for consideration: what has been the effect of the beach on Australian culture? Traits and qualities of character associated with the experience of bush life were used for many years to define what was typically Australian; could one
argue with equal or greater justification that the experience of living with the beach has shaped Australian culture in hitherto unrecognised or unrecorded ways?

This study attempts to establish a basis for answering these questions. Thus the first chapter takes up the initial, prompting question of the reason for the significance of the bush, rather than the beach, in Australian literature. The predominance of writing about the bush and the relative absence of the beach in our literature is noted. While the value of the bush as a rich source of imaginative and emotional inspiration is recognised, it is argued that writing about the bush also served to reinforce values which were conducive to the building of a new nation, a sense of national unity and the maintenance of the existing social order; in this regard, the contribution of writers in the late nineteenth century to ideas about the characteristics of “the typical Australian” is recognised as crucial. A partial explanation of the relative lack of reference to the beach in much of our literature is seen to be its lack of comparable ideological usefulness.

Not too much can be made of this point without examining the place of the beach in Australian life. To do this, it is necessary to probe back into our history, to discover when, and why, the beach became a distinctive feature of “the Australian way of life”. Documentary evidence relevant to this development proved to be fragmentary and elusive; it appears that our collective ignorance about many aspects of our history, an amnesia which has been increasingly recognised over the past decade, extends also to our memory of how we came to enjoy the beach.

One might expect a comprehensive history of the beach to begin by examining the relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the beach before European settlement. Since their occupation extends back over tens of thousands of years, the original inhabitants would have had to adapt to the shoreline encroaching and then receding as one Ice Age succeeded another. Beyond this general point, however, the difficulties in the way of accomplishing this task are insuperable. The coastal Aborigines of southern Australia were the first to vanish in face of European

---

5 Any such history would face difficulties of definition, for one would need to establish that the idea of the beach is appropriate in the context of Aboriginal experience. It could be that “the beach” is a purely European concept.
contact, reduced by disease, violence, dispossession and demoralisation, their way of life destroyed, their stories apparently lost. Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal groups in remoter northern areas less (or later) affected by settlement may hold intact their stories and memories of the place of the beach in their cultures; but such have not yet been shared with Australians in general.

The absence of the original inhabitants’ experience of the beach from the historical record, however regrettable, is understandable. What is less explicable is the silence of historians with respect to the place of the beach in Australian life since 1788. It is not surprising that the beach is absent from historic texts up to the last decade or so: as surveys of themes and preoccupations in Australian historiography show, many aspects of Australian life apart from political events and economic developments, land exploration and settlement have not been subjects of interest to historians. Among a recent proliferation of works on Australia’s social and cultural history, however, it might have been expected that some writers would find it interesting and worthwhile to investigate the development of the relationship between Australian people and their beaches since 1788; for study of this development has the potential to reveal how customs, attitudes and values change in the process of accommodation to a new environment. And this might lead us to a deeper understanding of the process of enculturation itself, as well as recognising and attending to an aspect of their environment which is important to many Australians.

Despite its potential significance, one will look in vain for a history of the beach in Australia. Dutton’s *Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand – the Myth of the Beach* is an entertaining survey of references to the beach in painting, photography and literature, but in no way a systematic history. There are of course local histories telling of events and people involving the beach in particular localities, and histories of various lifesaving clubs, but there are no scholarly treatments, generalisations based on a painstaking study of primary source material, or interpretations which seek to link the beach to other important aspects of Australian life. There is, for example, no entry for

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beach in the index of *Australian Cultural History*.\(^7\) Richard Waterhouse’s *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788*\(^8\) has no index entry for beach and only one for surfing (on the sexism of the surfing sub-culture in the seventies). John Rickard’s *Australia: A Cultural History*\(^9\) contains a few summary paragraphs on the beach and surfing; and *Constructing a Culture: A People’s History of Australia since 1788*,\(^10\) a determinedly non-elitist view of our history, looks at wowsers, the media, prostitutes and crime, but never mentions the beach, a source of so much of “the people’s” enjoyment. Walton’s comment regarding the history of English seaside resorts could be applied *a fortiori* to the attention paid to the beach by Australian historians:

> The rise of the seaside holiday industry sometimes receives a passing mention in textbooks on British History in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Often these references are wildly inaccurate, and invariably they fail to do justice to the importance of the subject.\(^11\)

Walton writes at the conclusion of his scholarly and detailed investigation of the English seaside resort that “Further research...is obviously needed, but the situation also demands some ambitious works of well-informed synthesis, even though many of their conclusions will be tentative and interim in nature”.\(^12\)

The historical chapter in the present study, while “tentative and interim in nature” seeks to achieve a “well informed synthesis”, linking the changing significance of the beach to other developments and forces in Australian history. The primary concern is to trace the process whereby an imported idea of the beach (or seaside) was transformed; in this development, the early part of the twentieth century is a critical period. Chapter Two therefore concentrates on this period and the events leading up to it, providing a foundation on which arguments advanced further into this investigation are based.


\(^12\) Walton, *English Seaside Resort*, p.226.
Given that there were significant differences in the history of the beach in different parts of Australia, relating to differences in climate, social factors and the accessibility of ocean beaches to major population centres, the history of the beach in Sydney is the main point of reference, for several reasons. Sydney was the first European settlement, the place from which British law and custom, the framework within which regulations and attitudes relating to bathing was first established, spread to the other colonies. Laws similar to those in New South Wales were passed in South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and Tasmania; in Queensland also, the early rules governing surf bathing were modelled on those in New South Wales. Sydney’s ocean beaches provided the setting in which aspects of a distinctive beach culture were first recognised and celebrated; the example of Sydney influenced the idea of the beach among Australians in other parts of the continent; and the Surf Life Saving Association to which the hundreds of surf lifesaving clubs were affiliated had its headquarters in Sydney, assisted in the development of clubs in other states, and set in place the model adopted by clubs Australia-wide. Thus generalisations are mostly based on primary sources relating to beaches in Sydney; but examples, exceptions and differences in other parts of the country are also noted.

Having described the evolution of the distinctively Australian beach, the study proceeds in Chapters Three and Four to survey Australian writing which refers or relates to the beach. Does the beach really have a “bad literary image”, as Dutton asserts? The Myth of the Beach contains his personal selection of extracts relating to the beach from poems, novels and other literary works, and while his appreciation of these works is implicit, he makes no explicit assessment of their literary significance. Echoing the neglect of the beach in historical research, there appears to have been no comprehensive attempt, by Dutton or anyone else, to select and focus on beach

14 J.R. Winders, Surf Life Saving in Queensland. South Brisbane: Queensland Centre of the Surf Life Saving Association, 1969. Winders acknowledges that “New South Wales must be regarded as the home of surf bathing in Australia” and that “it was natural that [public safety measures on the beaches] should emanate from the source of origin of this popular pastime – Sydney” (pp.vii, 18).
15 In Western Australia, for example, the first surf life saving club at Cottesloe beach was established in 1909 independently of those on the eastern seaboard; but it sought the advice and adopted the techniques of New South Wales clubs and affiliated with the New South Wales Surf Life Saving Association in the early 1920s (Edwin Jaggard, The Premier Club: Cottesloe Surf Life Saving Club’s First Seventy-Five Years. Cottesloe, Western Australia: Cottesloe Surf Life Saving Club, 1984, pp.24-26.)
writing as a distinctive body of work worthy of critical research and analysis. It was therefore necessary to distinguish works which could be so categorised, specifying criteria for selection and loosely adopting a chronological perspective in order to discern the extent to which the appearance of the beach in literature corresponds with its rise to popularity and general community acceptance. This chronological perspective provides the basis on which stages in the development of writing about the beach are distinguished. It also enables the detection of changes in the depiction of the beach as beachgoing becomes a less novel and more commonly taken-for-granted part of life. And just as the facts of the history of the beach show one aspect of a population’s adaptation to a new environment, so it is argued that writing about the beach is an index of adaptation at a deeper level - in the hearts and minds of the people who have become Australian. Ways in which the idea of the beach have been treated and imaginatively transformed are analysed, and the light these works cast on the incorporation of the beach within Australian culture, and changes in that culture, is discussed. On the basis of the material gathered and discussed in these chapters, a general assessment is made of the place of the beach in Australian literature.

Chapter Five concentrates on the notion of cultural change, grasping the nettle of controversy by engaging in the debate over the existence or otherwise of a distinctively Australian national identity. Chapter Six continues this exploration of the ways in which the beach has affected those who live here, detecting themes in our history and patterns of behaviour, thought and feeling which subtly but significantly shape our culture. It is argued that in the transformation from a society whose members perpetuated practices, attitudes and perceptions imported from their former homelands to one which is acquiring its own distinctive characteristics, the physical environment of the new homeland - of which the beach is an important part - has been a crucial influence.

Generally, the origins of this study lay in a perception, or an hypothesis, of discrepancy - between the significance of the bush and the beach in Australian life, and the bush and the beach in Australian literature; between the depicting of characteristics derived from imagined bush experience as aspects of "national character" and the absence of such depiction in the case of the beach. It involves the exploration of history, literature and culture to establish whether or not such
discrepancy exists; and the original hypothesis of discrepancy having been confirmed, suggests reasons for it, and reflects on its consequences. The role of literature in mediating and constructing a culture's idea of itself comes under scrutiny; themes of interest in our cultural life are identified and explored; and an attempt is made to illuminate our understanding of enculturation, the ways Australians have adapted to life in a new land.

It is fitting, as later discussion will make clear, that undertaking this investigation has required traversing - indeed, almost ignoring - boundaries between traditional academic disciplines, moving from psychoanalytic theory, Australian literature and literary history to cultural history and cultural studies. It is for the reader to judge whether the value of insights to be gathered from this eclectic approach outweighs the difficulties it presented. For the writer, at least, it has been an exhilarating and enlightening journey.
INTRODUCTION
THE BEACH AND ITS APPEAL

Energy is the only Life, and is from the Body...Energy is Eternal Delight.¹

YOU LIVE ONCE BUT YOU SURF FOREVER!²

Defining the beach

In the interest of communicating ideas clearly and directly to listeners or readers and minimising the risk of misunderstanding, debaters and writers regularly open their argument by defining key terms. A definition of the beach might therefore seem to be a sensible way to start, and an objectively easy task as well: a beach is a feature of the physical landscape and can therefore be defined and described with scientific precision.³ But to write of “the beach” is to deal with a concept, an abstraction. In attempting to describe what “the beach” means in this study, Jung’s theory of archetypes proves useful – but only as modified and reformulated in the light of insights and suggestions by later neo-Jungian theorists.

Jung had postulated a collective unconscious which is an “ancestral heritage of possibilities of representation”, containing qualities that are inherited and not acquired, common to all human beings, and organised in its manifestations by recurring patterns called archetypes or “typical modes of apprehension”.⁴ The notion of the archetype to be used here differs from Jung’s in the following ways: it is not necessarily universal (although it needs to be shared by many if it is to have cultural significance); and since it is affected by history as well as by subjective experience, it is not unchanging nor changeable. For Jung, the archetype is a kind of deposit

² A message chalked on the bitumen path leading to North Narrabeen beach, November 1995.
³ A scientific definition of a beach, with descriptions of distinguishing features of beaches and different categories of beach, is presented in Appendix A.
lodged in a collective unconscious. In the definition adopted here, the concept is more dynamic: the archetype consisting of process as well as content.

The revision of the idea of an archetype proposed here is more usefully conceived of as an archetypal field, major elements of which are held in common in the minds of those with similar experiences in similar settings. It involves a complex linking of memories, images, emotions and coenaesthetic impressions associated with particular places, behaviours and events, all suffused with psychic energy generated by the mind's response to this constellation of phenomena. Expressions or intimations of an archetypal field arise out of the dynamic interchange between conscious and unconscious levels of experiencing and functioning which characterises the archetypal process, the images which derive from this process being rich and generative. An archetype is a transactional phenomenon, a site where inner and outer worlds meet, revealing itself in language and interpretation.

Archetypes are distinguished from mundane patterns of repeated experience, for example travel to and from work, by their numinosity — that is, their capacity to evoke feelings of awe and fascination, a sense of the majesty and power associated with the archetype along with apprehension of the relative insignificance of the individual self. In his discussions of the numinous, Jung is ambiguous: while claiming he can only speak of human psychological experience, he comes close to collapsing the distinction between theological and psychological realms. The position taken here is that there is a widespread if not innate human tendency towards apprehension of the numinous; and that this often has, but need not have, connections with ideas of God and the supernatural.


The beach is an archetype or archetypal field as defined here, and this is the way this term will be used in the chapters to follow. It encompasses events and activities engaged in at a beach, and all the sensations, memories, images, thoughts and emotions associated with the experience or the idea of beaches. It is suggested that an archetype of the beach operates within the minds of a sufficient number of Australians for it to be a significant influence within Australian culture. It has developed out of local experience, although it may incorporate elements of older archetypes – for example, the sea’s association with the idea of the Mother is a familiar and constant feature in Jungian analysis. In this study it is assumed that, in the specific context of Australian culture, the beach has attained archetypal status.

One element of the archetypal status of the beach is the powerful attraction it holds for many people. How can this attraction be explained? In trying to understand fundamental reasons for the appeal of the beach, I have found two works, both incorporating a Freudian perspective, to be especially valuable: Dorothy Dinnerstein’s The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise, and Norman O. Brown’s Life Against Death: the Psychoanalytic Meaning of History. Although these authors never mention the beach, an application of their ideas to this question suggests a way of understanding what the experience of the beach signifies in terms of the emotions it evokes, and the association of these emotions with other apparently unrelated feelings and drives. Insights derived from their arguments influence interpretations of various literary works discussed later in

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*8 In the same way snow and ice, for example, have analogous significance in the cultures of peoples living within the Arctic circle.

*Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise, New York: Harper & Row, 1976 and Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1950. Dinnerstein’s book deals with the unhealthy, rigid symbiosis which has dominated relations between women and men and which, it is argued, stems from a core fact of primary female responsibility for the care of infants and young children. Its central feminist thesis may have narrowed its appeal and discouraged readers who would find its analysis of the pathologies of modern life and its concern with the future of “central human projects” (p.11) of interest. Brown’s work presents a “systematic statement, critique and reinterpretation of... crucial concepts in psychoanalytic theory” (p.x), in which he attempts to reconcile some of the dualisms in his theory which became stumbling-blocks for Freud, and to explore the role of repression in civilization.*
this study, and add depth and subtlety to the analysis of cultural effects of the beach presented in Chapters Five and Six.

The appeal of the beach

When we human beings go to the beach and cross the threshold from the sand to the sea through the fringing waves, we gain “access, incomparably literal sensuous access, to that vital level of the self which is continuous with infancy”. As we move into deeper water we re-live the experience of immersion, of merging into oneness with the vast undifferentiated matrix. We discover again the joy of play: of dancing through the froth, gliding up the wave face or diving through it (or, at a higher level of grace and skill, riding the wave front as bodysurfer or boardrider). We are enveloped in total sensory stimulation as the cool silky water slides around our bodies, the foam fizzes over the surface of our skin, the roar of the waves fills our ears, the taste of salt our mouths, as the body of the infant responds with ecstasy to stroking, touching, murmuring, feeding.

And after we live this experience we return to the land, to the sand, where we may lie in drowsy bliss, just as the sated infant sleeps, all tension spent. Or we may engage in different kinds of play: the child’s busy engrossment in the building of castles and elaborate sandworks; the adult’s walking along the beach and back again, to nowhere, to no purpose, in contented solitude or easy conversation with a companion; or retreat higher up the beach to watch the waves where their rhythmic, repetitive beat, their perpetual advance and retreat, bring a kind of calming reassurance: the sea, always there, though others might vanish, hurt us, abandon us, be unavailable.

The fundamental attraction of the beach lies, then, in it being “one of the opportunities that life now and then offers for direct recapture of the earliest mode, the unqualified animal-poetic mode, of erotic intercourse with the surround”. The essence of this “recapture” is

10 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.244.
11 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.145.
...the joy of a creature who knows time and senses its own separateness, who has become familiar with striving and with the ebb and flow, the melting together and drawing apart, that form the living tie between its fragile individual existence and the hurtful, entrancing surround: it is the joy of a creature who remembers and anticipates less primitive ways of feeling and, suspending what it knows, what it remembers and anticipates, surrenders itself to the melting, flowing moment. So while this joy is not the lost pure euphoria of infancy, it does echo that euphoria clearly enough to offer us episodic, momentary recapture of its flavour... 

For many, the “joy” which probably first springs to mind in association with the phrase “erotic intercourse with the surround” is that of sexual intercourse. But as Dinnerstein points out, the hoped-for joy of sex is complicated by the fact that

...when another sentient being is present for us, even in fantasy, our thought and feeling are in turn shot through with impressions of that being’s state of awareness. This state of awareness, moreover, we perceive as including - actually or potentially - some knowledge of our own sentient presence. Sexual feeling in our case thus radically transcends momentary and solitary pleasure or relief. It is experienced as extending backward and forward into time, and it interpenetrates with the subjectivity...of the creature who attracts us. 

Brown notes another factor which inhibits our enjoyment of pure erotic pleasure in adult sexual activity: the capacity to enjoy pleasure in all parts of the surface of the body and the internal organs is available to the infant, “who explore(s) in an indiscriminate and anarchistic fashion all the erotic potentialities of the human body. In Freudian terms, children are polymorphously perverse”. But “normal” adult sexuality involves an unnatural restriction of these potentialities because some of the components of infantile sexuality are repressed and others subordinated to the genital-reproductive function which we are socialised to regard as the basic purpose of sexual activity.

If not primarily in sexual relations, then, in what other situations are feelings of which Dinnerstein writes likely to be experienced? She states that “Art and religion offer us

12Mermaid and Minotaur, p.144.
15Life Against Death, pp.27-29.
opportunities of this kind, and so does pleasure in nature if we allow them to touch us at the relevant level of feeling; but we rarely do.

While for many being in the bush, “at one with nature,” affords the opportunity for this kind of joy, physical envelopment by moving water and the near-total immersion in the “entrancing surround” experienced at the beach provides a particularly pure example of “surrender to the moment”. Being-in-the-surf is also qualitatively different from swimming or floating in lake, pool or river (which may also provide pleasure of the kind Dinnerstein describes) because the ever-changing, ever-moving waves, foam, spray and sand accentuate the playful, interactive quality of the experience. In the surf the energy of the body at play synergises with that released by the wave:

...all the energy so carefully gleaned from the winds of the distant storm and hoarded for a thousand miles of ocean crossing is gone, expended in a few wild moments [as the wave breaks]. Because the energy is released so rapidly, the energy density in the surf is actually much higher than in the storm which originally created the waves.

It is during these playful moments that we are most true to ourselves, for according to Freud, “Man is only completely a man when he plays”. And Freud is not alone in identifying play as an essential human activity, the potential of which is often perverted or destroyed by civilization. The Christian theologian, Jacob Boehme, wrote that

As God plays with the time of this outward world, so also should the inward divine man play with the outward in the revealed wonders of God in this world, and open the Divine Wisdom in all creatures, each according to its

16 My emphasis.
17 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.146.
18 Gaston Bachlard’s Water and Dreams: an Essay on the Imagination of Matter, translated from the French by Edith R. Farrell, Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983, is a brilliant exposition of the “many voices” of water, the variety of the images associated with it, and the many ways the human imagination plays with the idea of water. While acknowledging Bachlard’s achievement in this stimulating work, I have not drawn from it in formulating the argument presented here.
20 Freud, referring to the conclusion to Schiller’s “Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man”, quoted in Life Against Death, p.33. (These works were all written at a time before sexist language became an issue).
property. Adam fell when this play became serious business. 21

Brown refers to observers who emphasise man’s increasing alienation from his work; the possibility of mass unemployment – that is, liberation from work – afforded by modern technology; and the utter incapacity of human nature to make genuinely free use of liberation from work – to play. 22 Huizinga in Homo Ludens also suggests that the advance of civilization has repressed the play element in culture; culture has to that extent been dehumanized 23

The intrinsic eroticism of beach activity is manifest in its playfulness. Yet, in alluding to the “hurtful, entrancing surround”, Dinnerstein acknowledges the ambivalence that is inescapably part of human experience. At the beach we know our helplessness when waves dump us or the rip drags us this way or that. We feel our own weakness in the grip of that overpowering strength; mingled with our joy is a fear of the perils that lurk in the opaque depths – the sharks, the biting and stinging creatures, the unimaginable. Thus awareness of the potential for danger as well as delight is always with us, but as long as it remains “an undercurrent”, the intensification of sensory arousal associated with this awareness may actually increase our pleasure.

The beach, then, is a site peculiarly conducive to the “direct recapture of .. erotic intercourse with the surround” identified by Dinnerstein. Testimony to the delight aroused by this “recapture” is not hard to find:

That crowded beach [Bondi] had a sound, a roar of excitement. You could say it was joy… 24

I can remember one crystalline morning when nothing seemed more beautiful than the look, the sound and the smell of the green and white Pacific. I launched my board onto that swaying transparency, paddled it over the

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21 Quoted by Brown in Life Against Death, p.33.
22 Many would find that Brown’s words ring even truer today than when written more than forty years ago.
rainbow spray and the bucking waves singing ‘shenandoah’ at the top of my voice and certain that nothing anywhere in the world could match this joy.  

and

Digging in it, lying in it, check against it, the length of one’s shivering body warmed by it. What is it about an ocean beach that so marvellously pacifies a child’s discontents? ...Kids don’t need to be told what to do on a beach. They know it already.

It was a good day with the sun shining, and I was sliding off the peak into the deep water when suddenly I felt as though I could keep going and going, pushing on and on as though there was no end to it anywhere. You go into oblivion. Suddenly all your life is there in this long, long stretched-out wave; you’re removed from the past, everything that has been on your mind becomes immaterial. everything goes to jelly, and you feel completely removed from the world around you. Nothing matters any longer but you and the board and the wave and this instant of time.

There is nowhere else I’d rather be, nothing else I would prefer to be doing. I am at the beach looking west with the continent behind me as the sun tracks down to the sea. I have my bearings.

Thus the beach holds potent meaning for human beings irrespective of culture, since it invites us to re-live the “early carnal joy” experienced in infancy, before we are enculturated. In many countries practical considerations of climate, geography, history, accessibility of the ocean and cultural inhibitions limit, discourage or prevent the expression of this desire; but in Australia a combination of favourable climate, geography, accessibility, and - eventually - history and culture have combined to enhance the ability and the inclination of Australians to respond to the beach’s attraction.

This fundamental meaning of the beach is based on what we have experienced in our pre-conscious, pre-verbal infancy. The feelings associated with these earliest, most intense experiences are described by Dinnerstein as “massive orienting passions”.


29 *Mermaid and Minotaur*, p.15.
which exert a powerful effect on later perceptions, attitudes, choices and values. In other words, much of the meaning which we ascribe to people, events and emotions in later life is shaped and coloured by what occurred before we had language, before we were inducted into society and culture.

Such a perspective runs counter to the emphasis on cultural determinants of human behaviour in most contemporary critical theory. It does not deny the benefits of the insights which attention to cultural influences has brought to literary and social theory and analysis; nor does it deny, in the current context, that multiple layers of cultural meanings augment and modify the primal meaning of the beach experience. But it helps to explain why the appeal of the beach is so fundamental; and it goes further in suggesting how crucial it is for our psychological health and wholeness to take advantage of “the opportunities for direct, effortless erotic flow between the self and the environment that life continues, episodically, to offer” - opportunities of which the beach provides, in Australia, an easily accessible example.

It could be argued that the episodes of which Dinnerstein writes so eloquently are pleasant but essentially trivial diversions from the serious business of life; but she is emphatic that they are “vital supplements” for other compensations that life offers and which help to assuage our “inconsolable grief” - a grief which has two sources: the initial separation from the mother and consequent loss of the infant illusion of omnipotence; and the realization that we must die. These other compensations are history-making - “the pool of memorable event, communicable insight, teachable technique, durable achievement”; and work, the quest for mastery, competence, enterprise - “the new joy of successful activity is some compensation for the old joy of passive, effortless wish-fulfillment [sic]”.

While the exercise of these compensatory drives makes a positive contribution to human potential if they are held in a proper balance, in modern society their pathological aspects are most evident. Dinnerstein summarises Brown as he echoes

30 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.156.
31 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.121.
32 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.208.
33 Mermaid and Minotaur, p.60.
and elaborates Freud’s argument regarding the pathology on which civilization is founded:

Civilization is an attempt to overcome death...it has so far been shot through with neurotic denial of the fact of death. And what this means is that it has also been shot through with neurotic rejection of a joy that cannot be felt while death is denied: the direct joy of our perishable fleshly individual existence. This incapacity to die [unwillingness to accept the fact of dying] inevitably throws mankind out of the actuality of living...the result is denial of life...The war against death takes the form of a preoccupation with the past and the future, and the present tense, the tense of life, is lost.34

Brown adds that “the death instinct is reconciled with the life instinct only in a life which is not repressed, which leaves no ‘unlived lives’ in the human body, the death instinct then being affirmed in a body which is willing to die”.35 He regards work and history-making as neurotic sublimations which arise out of our refusal to face death.

Dinnerstein, on the other hand, considers that work and history-making provide partial compensations for the knowledge that all this will outlive us. Involvement with the world and with other people both intensifies and eases the pain of knowing we will die:

On the one hand, attachment to this ongoing world helps make our awareness of mortality painful. Our sense of personal significance is assaulted by the thought that this massive, vivid human reality...has managed before and will manage again to get on without us. On the other hand, our attachment to the ongoing world can also help make mortality more bearable. Since the influence we have exerted outlives us, we are not...wholly mortal.36

She agrees with Brown, however, that “Man’s incapacity to live in the body... is also his incapacity to die”.37

To the extent, then, that we can embrace opportunitites for “direct, effortless erotic flow between the self and the environment”, we become more able to “handle the prospect of the final separation without despising the body’s simple wishes, without

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34Life Against Death, p.284.
35Life Against Death, p.308.
36Mermaid and Minotaur, p.116.
37Mermaid and Minotaur, p.120.
robbing the body of the poignant, cherished status that rightly belongs to loved and perishable things”.38

It may be objected that, in examining and attempting to explain these compensatory drives - to erotic pleasure, to history-making and to work - both these writers appear to have ignored a drive which is also of crucial importance - that is, the drive to connect with and relate to others. Wherein lies the need for the self to reach out to people beyond itself, if its own body is the source of delight? In fact, the main concern of Dinnerstein’s book is the development of relationships with others, in particular the troubled, problematic relationship between women and men which she sees as being made pathological by the fact that the foundations of all subsequent emotional life, with its ambivalences and complexities, are laid down in the context of infant and early child care which is primarily maternal. She does not, however, directly address the question: how does the ability to re-experience, even partially, “this early carnal joy” affect our relationships with others?

Brown deals with this difficulty, pointing out that Freud could not solve this problem to his own satisfaction because he was inhibited by the conception of Self and Other as mutually exclusive alternatives. Brown offers the image of Narcissus as a solution: Narcissus needs a mirror. In an apparent paradox, the self-absorption of erotic bodily enjoyment stimulates a subsequent turning outward, engagement with the world and with other people, because of the “fountain of play and erotic exuberance” it releases.39 He quotes Nietzsche’s Zarathustra:

I love him whose soul is overfull so that he forgets himself and all things are in him...His word pronounced selfishness blessed, the wholesome healthy selfishness that wells from a powerful soul...to which belongs the high body, beautiful, triumphant, refreshing, around which everything becomes a mirror - the supple, persuasive body, the dancer whose parable and epitome is the self-enjoying soul.40

38Mermaid and Minotaur, p.156. Dinnerstein’s more positive view of work and history-making will be adopted in this study.
39Life Against Death, p.50.
In other words, energy is liberated which nourishes and enriches our engagements with the world and with others.

Brown judges that Freud was misled by his metaphysical bias towards dualism - hence his oppositions of Eros and Thanatos, Love and Hate, Ego-instinct and Eros, and so on. In Brown’s treatment of these concepts, he discerns dialectic rather than dualism, a blurring of categories. He argues that the primal mother-infant situation represents a fusion of erotic and non-erotic (specifically, economic - self-preservation, hunger) needs; and he criticizes civilization for making antagonistic opposites out of economics and love, work and play: “mankind will not cease from discontent until the antinomy of economics and love, work and play, is overcome”.41

Contemporary theoretical and critical writing bristles with dualisms, particularly Self-Other distinctions and analyses of Otherness. The notion of the other has been defined by Taylor as:

that which, by being different, other than, permits anything to be distinct, to be perceived as being what it is and not indistinguishable. The other is both antagonist and rival and also the only thing that enables a sense of identity to be experienced. It is important to remember that “identity” is only difference from the other - difference is therefore integral to, and internal to, identity42.

Applying these ideas to the beach and its appeal, Self-Other categories hardly seem to fit. In the surf there is a voluntary at-one-ness with the surround, a surrender and a merging which is all the more pleasurable because of the knowledge that individuality and separateness or the company of others can be retrieved whenever one chooses. As will become evident when meanings of the beach are considered later in this work, notions of ambiguity and flux have proved more fruitful than definitions based on difference. Perhaps it is timely to suggest that in chopping up the world into is/is not bits, like the binary language of the computer, something might be lost between the cracks.

41Life Against Death, p.53.
Thus ideas taken from these two works and applied to understanding the appeal of the beach suggest an interrelationship among a range of feelings and drives: recapture of the relatively uncomplicated joy experienced in infancy; enjoyment of play, of the pleasure of the moment rather than preoccupation with past and future; a lesser fear of death and a greater ability to genuinely accept its inevitability; the drive to seek satisfaction from work or purposeful activity; and a desire to contribute to humanity’s projects, to participate in the making of history. Brown regards thinking which categorises experience in terms of dualisms or dichotomies as an impediment to understanding. Dinnerstein sees the relationship among the drives she discusses, or the achievement of a healthy balance among them, as problematic. In the lives of both individuals and society in general, the interplay of these drives and emotions takes complex and unpredictable forms which are not easily simplified or categorised.

Assumptions based on ideas presented in this Introduction inform interpretations of literature and of other cultural manifestations to be presented in the chapters that follow.
CHAPTER ONE

CONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIA: WRITERS, THE BUSH AND THE BEACH

Quoting an appreciative assessment by Tim Winton of the importance of the beach in his childhood, Andrew Taylor comments:

I think this is a common Australian experience. It has certainly been mine...I think this sense of a childhood dominated by summer and the beach is a common one in Australia...that part of it [our youth] spent on the beach seems to bulk far larger than it actually should if one measured it only in days and weeks.1

If “a childhood dominated by summer and the beach” is a common Australian experience, it might be expected that this prominence would be reflected in literature. But if we look at the way Australians have represented themselves and their country in their writing, the beach has, until recently, been insignificant.

The invisibility of the beach is evident if one explores literary collections or anthologies which attempt to select, in the words of the Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature, “what one or more people consider worth drawing attention to and preserving”.2 Of the 183 selections in that anthology, only one - “Sydney Surfing” by Jean Curlewis - deals directly with the beach; two others - “Towards Abstraction/Possibly a Gull’s Wing”, a short poem by Robert Adamson, and “It Was High Tide at Nine-thirty”, a chapter from For Love Alone by Christina Stead - have themes associated with the beach. But there are literally scores of selections which deal with bush themes and landscapes.

As if conscious of this disparity, in a section of the Introduction headed “Inventing New Groupings”, the editors suggest:

If convictism and the bush seem hackneyed themes, it is possible to construct a grouping concerned with experiences of the shoreline and coastal regions of Australia. It might include Cook’s Account, the Djang-gawul Song Cycle, Mudrooroo Narogin’s [Colin Johnson’s] Dr Wooreddy, Keneally’s The Playmaker, the ballads ‘Botany Bay’ and ‘Moreton Bay’, Brennan’s Each day I see the long ships coming into port, Jean Curlewis’ ‘Sydney Surfing’ and so on.

Even so, only the last-named deals with the beach as it is understood here.

Geoffrey Dutton was asked by the publisher Richard Walsh to make a selection of up to 100 classic Australian books; the result was The Australian Collection: Australia’s Greatest Books - a large claim, and Dutton is not quite explicit as to his criteria for inclusion, though noting that “to understand it [a nation] you have to read its books”, and that while a nation’s literature varies in ultimate quality “...it is thereby no less important in shaping and reflecting the nation’s image, both to its own people and in the eyes of foreigners”. Despite the reproduction of Charles Meere’s painting Australian Beach Pattern on the Table of Contents page, only one of the hundred “classics” from which extracts are selected - Storm Boy, by Colin Thiele - has a beach setting (Diary of a Beachcomber sounds as if it should be about the beach, but it really about observations of nature on a Barrier Reef island). The “rural” or “bush” settings, subjects and reference of many of the extracts are however, inescapable. And in The Penguin Book of 19th Century Australian Literature, of seventy-eight extracts from nineteenth-century authors, not one has a beach setting, while forty-nine are explicitly set in the bush.

A review of writers who have been outstandingly influential contributors to the creation of a distinctively Australian literature reveals how common it is for their works to have a bush setting. This is true of many children’s classics - Ethel Pedley’s Dot and the Kangaroo (1899), May Gibbs’ Gumnut Babies books and comic strip (1916-1918), Norman Lindsay’s The Magic Pudding (1918), the stories of Mary

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3Macmillan Anthology, p.5.
6Although the Gumnut babies go surfing on at least one occasion, using gum leaves as surfboards (see picture in Dutton, Myth of the Beach, p 116).
Grant Bruce - and even more so of our best-known writers of poetry and fiction: Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Steele Rudd, Joseph Furphy, "Banjo" Paterson, Henry Lawson, Xavier Herbert, Douglas Stewart, David Campbell, Judith Wright... the list goes on and on. Almost all the authors who most readily come to mind are strongly identified with bush themes.

This has been so since the earliest days of settlement. In his history of Australian literature H.M. Green writes of the small body of fictional writing in what he categorises as the First Period of Australian literature, from 1789 to 1850, that it

...throws some light on the life of the large and small settler; of the station-owner, so far as farm and station owner were distinguishable; of the country gentleman, an English type... of convict servants, and of bushrangers. Then, and for a long time afterwards, the countryside was to remain the centre to which writers and readers naturally turned; indeed... it occupies the background, as well as often enough the foreground of Australian fiction still.

In more recent work, the presence of the bush is not as overwhelming as it once was, and writers draw upon a much more diverse range of themes. Nevertheless, the bush still provides a frequent source of inspiration: the winner of the Miles Franklin award for 1997 was David Foster for *The Glade within the Grove* which is mainly set in a forested valley in southern New South Wales; David Malouf won an International IMPAC Dublin literary award in 1997 for *Remembering Babylon*, which is set in a small pioneer community settlement in north Queensland; and for Les Murray, whom some consider to be Australia’s greatest living poet, the bush is his spiritual and emotional homeland, a major source of the imagery through which his poetic imagination finds expression.

The more this kind of evidence is inspected, the more confidently can two generalisations be made: the beach is insignificant, the bush dominant, in any survey of Australian literature from the time of settlement. The pervasive presence of the

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bush has led to a view of our literary heritage which is neatly summed up in Nigel Krauth’s memories of what he learned at school:

I had the constant impression in childhood and adolescence that Australia lay somewhere to the west - out there- where I hadn’t been. And was another country... the great classics of Australian literature had nothing to do with me or the country that I was familiar with [he grew up near Manly]. The Western Plains, the Vision Splendid, the Overflow (where the hell was the Overflow?) the Bush, the Outback - where were these places? 8

Taylor points out that ideology is never absent from a text, and is most present when it is unconscious and therefore unnoticed: “its presence is visible in what it omits from the text”. 9 Given that the beach has been “absent from the text” and the bush so omnipresent, it is a matter of some interest to consider why this has been so.

Sydney the seaport town

Until the late 1830s, a maritime culture dominated the town of Sydney. Sydney was a “highly sea-conscious town”, where most colonists “felt themselves perched on the Pacific seaboard rather than at the gateway of a great continent”10. Ross Gibson states that

Sydney Town surged with ocean-workers. The whaling industry was the staple of the colonial economy for decades...there were seal-hunters, timber-getters and opportunistic traders...The shoreline around the Tank Stream surged with opinions, desires and worldviews brought in from the ocean.11

It is intriguing that so little trace remains in our collective memory of this early maritime experience. Frost ponders the question: “Why did our progenitors on the Cumberland Plain not find their life on the edge of the great ocean distinctive enough

to offer a separate identity? Why did we develop no legend of Pacific identity?" 12
And Cunningham echoes this thought in his account of the crossing of the Blue
Mountains:

We are maritime, we are commercial, we are urban, or at least suburban.
Settlement of the coastline...has always been more significant in forming the
character of the nation...than settlement of the inland...We cling,
nevertheless to the idea that development of the inland is the very core of
national ethos. 13

How did our cultural preoccupation with the bush, rather than the coast, come to
develop? Clues to an answer lie in early views of the bush - the physical
configuration of the new land - as the site of a new civilization; the soil from which
sustenance for the new settlements had to be drawn; and a resource to be owned and
"worked" in order to generate wealth for its owners.

**Taming the land: the utility of the bush versus the “uselessness” of the beach**

In its earliest incarnation “the bush” was the Australian landscape: strange, beautiful
in the eyes of some of the new arrivals, 14 ugly, drear or hostile to others, 15 its chief
significance lay in its potential to be civilized, transformed, through agriculture. The
decision of the British government to found a convict settlement at Botany Bay was
strongly influenced by Cook’s report of fertile soils near Botany Bay 16 and by Banks’

Australian Quest for Identity, edited by John Carroll, second edition, Melbourne: Oxford University
13 Chris Cunningham, The Blue Mountains Rediscovered: Beyond the Myths of Early Australian
14Sec. for example, the accounts of George Worgan, Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon, C830; Rev.
William Branwhite Clarke, 2 June 1839, Diary 1838/39, MSS 139/7, Item 3, quoted in Stephen Martin,
A New Land: European Perceptions of Australia 1788-1850, State Library of New South Wales, Allen
& Unwin 1993; and D.D. Mann, The Present Picture of New South Wales 1811, with an introduction
by Professor Brian Fletcher, first published in 1811 by John Booth, Sydney: John Ferguson in
15Less favourable reactions are expressed by John White, Journal of a Voyage to New South Wales,
London, Debrett, 1790, and Thomas Watling, Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay, to his Aunt in
Dumfries: Giving a Particular Account of the Settlement of New South Wales, with the Customs and
Manners of the Inhabitants, Penrith, 1794? p.15, quoted in Ross Gibson, The Diminishing Paradise:
Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia. Sydney: A Sirius Book, Angus & Robertson, 1984, p.37,
p.50.
Land was defined in terms of its usefulness for agriculture: when in August 1788 Phillip walked along a 'much frequented' native path to Pittwater he found “several hundred acres of land free from timber and very proper for cultivation...” 19 On this same expedition Lieutenant Dawes noted on the maps he made of the area that the northern part contained ‘Good Pasture for Sheep - No Trees’, while Lambert Peninsula, now much valued as a scenic national park, was dismissed as “very bad and rugged” - that is, no good for farming. 20

Early activity was directed towards establishing self-sufficiency for the infant colony, and there was no imperative for expansion beyond the Hawkesbury district and the Cumberland Plain until the numbers of free settlers changed the character of what had been first and foremost a penal settlement. 21 For a generation or so the vicissitudes of the infant colony, and the distraction of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, meant that the lure of an abundance of potentially productive land made little impact on those in Britain. But with the publication of accounts of the colonies such as Wakefield’s and

21 Cunningham, Blue Mountains Rediscovered, p.149. The idea that pressures for the expansion of settlement were thwarted by the difficulty of crossing the Blue Mountains has been dismissed by Cunningham, who presents a plausible argument against the view that Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth should take the honours for the first crossing. It seems that no axiom of Australian history is sacred!
Curr's in the 1820s, \(^{22}\) desire for land ownership fuelled the immigration of free settler emigrants. Up until 1830 there had been only 15,700 free immigrants and nearly 61,000 convicts; by 1850 more than 191,000 free immigrants had arrived, as against 144,615 convicts.\(^ {23}\)

In Britain, where land ownership had been the key to wealth and prestige for centuries, millions of acres of rural land were enclosed and taken over by rich landowners in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries - "whole villages and great tracts of common land were appropriated".\(^ {24}\) By 1841, 45% of Irish farms were less than 5 acres each.\(^ {25}\) Land hunger in Britain could only be satisfied by moving to the new lands being opened up overseas.

In Australia, with the crossing of the Blue Mountains came epic journeys of exploration, their explicit and primary purpose the finding of arable land. The journals of the explorers bear testimony to this insatiable appetite for cultivable land.\(^ {26}\) Eyre summed up the failure of his exploratory expedition in these terms:

I have no important rivers to enumerate, no fertile regions to point out for the future spread of colonisation and civilisation, no noble spread of ranges to describe from which are washed the debris that might form a rich and fertile district between them: on the contrary, all has been arid in the extreme.\(^ {27}\)

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\(^{24}\)B. Bessant, *The Land Hunger: Policy and Documents*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia Pty Ltd., 1980, p.1. This was merely the latest step in a long history of land seizures - by warfare, repression and murder, and act of Parliament - in rural Britain. In a sense, when the new settlers drove the Aborigines off their lands, some were doing what had been done to them. (Others, of course, came from the class which had profited from the land seizures).


\(^{26}\)See, for example, the Journals of Cunningham, Hovell, Mitchell and Sturt.

In his prizewinning poem “Australasia”, W.C. Wentworth expressed his vision for the future might and prosperity of his homeland:

Ne'er may the hope of plunder lure to roam
One Australasian from his happy home:
Be theirs the task to lay with lusty blow
The ancient giants of the forest low,
With frequent fires the cumber'd plain to clear,
To take the steed, and yolk the stubborn steer,
With cautious plough to rip the virgin earth,
And watch her first-born harvest from its birth,
Till, singed with summer suns the golden glade
Delight the hind and claim the reaper's blade;
Theirs too the task, with skilful hand to rear
The varied fruits that gild the ripen'd year;
Whether the melting peach, or juicy pear...

Not only was the land tamed, but it came to be owned: it became Property, thence a potent instrument at the service of the history-making, nation-building enterprise. Land grants were a form of power for the civil authority, rewarding the favoured, the ingratiating or the industrious; and where land was not granted, squatters occupied it anyway. In lieu of the spiritual claim to the land held by the Aborigines but which they then lacked the power to assert, tangible, legal land ownership was stamped on the land by the rule of British law. Thus bush became farms, stations, properties, holdings, and the new settlers began to persuade themselves that they belonged, either feeling no guilt at having usurped the territory of the original inhabitants, or repressing such qualms into unconsciousness. And in fact, they did come to belong:

for in the experience of working to transform nature, the settlers transformed

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30 See in particular Henry Reynolds, The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1982; Aborigines, Settlers and Land, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1987; and other works by the same author.
themselves as well, and began to establish a relationship of mutual respect with the land.\(^{31}\)

By way of contrast, the beach is the most unpromising terrain imaginable. It is a constantly shifting entity: as low tide replaces high tide, as tides change with the phases of the moon, and as the sea assails the beach in storms and cyclones, its shape and its extent cannot be mapped and claimed in a way consistent with legal precision.

Aiding and abetting the protean nature of the beach in its resistance to ownership is its resistance to cultivation, its uselessness. Nothing solid and permanent can be built on it. Nothing worthwhile will grow on it. We make negligible use of the seaweed sometimes yielded up by the tide; and fishing from the beach, as Tench had noted in the earliest days of settlement,\(^ {32}\) is all too often an unrewarding activity. Shellfish can be harvested; boats can be launched to trawl in deeper waters and to return with their catch; but in these activities we demean our civilized selves to the level of hunter-gatherers, a form of regression, in contrast to the status and respectability conferred by land ownership. In his poem “Song of the Future”, A.B. (“Banjo”) Paterson eulogised the highly valued interior over the now despised edge of the continent:

The way is won! The way is won!  
And straightway from the barren coast  
There came a westward marching host,  
With eager faces to the west,  
Along the pathway of the sun.\(^ {33}\)

The bush, in the early days of settlement and in a continuing, though diminishing and now contested sense, has therefore been seen as useful and important in its potential for transformation into land fit for habitation and cultivation - the site for the

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\(^{33}\) A.B. Paterson. *Collected Verse*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1946, p.165 – emphasis added. Recent estimates that Australia’s marine territories could contribute between $50 and $85 billion a year to the national economy within a quarter of a century cast a different light on Paterson’s description of the coast as barren (“Ocean Outlook - A Blueprint for the Oceans - A Report from the Congress 16-17”) (Continued on next page)
civilization which has been transplanted from the northern hemisphere. The beach offers no potential for these uses, and has therefore been set aside, left out of the national enterprise.

The identification of the bush with work versus the encouragement to hedonism of the beach

Related to the importance of land and cultivation in the building of the new society is the value of work - both instrumentally, in taming the land, and morally, in constructing a moral legitimacy for a colony of gaolers and convicts which had been riddled with illegitimacy of every kind. Ronald Conway sums up the attitude to work of the civilization which founded the new settlement:

Ernst Troelsch, in his classic work on the social teaching of the Christian churches, shows how the dogmatic Calvinist puritan ethic of work gradually outgrew its religious baptism and wormed its joyless way into the secular socio-economic activity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This work ethic meant... 'a process of objectifying work' where it was 'exalted into an ascetic vocational ethic'. Thus work became a necessary end in itself. Its rewards became irrelevant to the almost paranoid powers over spontaneity or materials it conferred.

This notion of work is far from the "pleasure in exercising our talent for cerebration and complex effort, and in using our power to make at least some things happen" which is celebrated by Dinnerstein, rather, it is work harnessed to the purpose of distinguishing the virtuous from the vicious, of subordinating the desires of one group of women and men to the demands of another.

The redemptive function of work was peculiarly important in Australia, given the colony's degrading, unpromising beginnings. Hardworking convicts were rewarded by being given tickets-of-leave and allowed to set up their own enterprises. The

Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p.145.
encouragement and glorification of habits of work was important in a number of ways: as well as making useful citizens of former criminals, it developed, extended and made prosperous the new civilization.

Had theologians of Jacob Boehme’s ilk been more influential, both work and play might have been viewed as expressions of the Divine creative impulse. Instead, while work was judged to be morally uplifting, enjoyment for its own sake was viewed as immoral. The notion that play or enjoyment might be of greater redemptive value in the treatment of the convicts than the discipline of unmitigated work was anathema to prevailing attitudes, even unthinkable; hence the reactions of the authorities and of respectable members of society to an episode described in Robert Hughes The Fatal Shore which occurred during the reformer Alexander Maconochie’s period in command of the dreadful penal settlement on Norfolk Island. The newly arrived commander proclaimed Queen’s Birthday in 1840 as a public holiday for everyone, bond and free.

Turning out of bed, the Old Hands as well as the new convicts were stupified to find the great gates of the walled prison compounds standing wide open. They would wander as they pleased on the island, swim in the sea, stretch and frolic on the sand - as long. Maconochie’s proclamation warned them, as they showed by ‘retiring to their quarters at the sound of the bugle...that they might be trusted with safety.’

The men cooked their special holiday food over “festive little barbecue fires”; there were entertainments after the meal - plays, music, poetry; and after fireworks, when the last spark had trailed away in the blackness, Maconochie noted that

> not a single irregularity, or even anything approaching an irregularity, took place ...Every man quietly returned to his ward, some even anticipated the hour.\(^\text{37}\)

A “wave of execration” broke over Maconochie’s head when Sydney colonists heard of this extraordinary day. It was not long before Maconochie was banished from Norfolk Island, a sadistic commander taking his place.

“Powers over spontaneity” exercised by the controllers of capital in Britain may have been easier to enforce in a country where the physical environment for the labouring classes was less conducive to unrestricted enjoyment. In Australia, opportunities for pleasurable idleness were more accessible and therefore more likely to threaten and subvert the maintenance of a work ethic. In Geoffrey Dutton’s view:

Of all countries in the world, none presents greater opportunities for hedonism than Australia. Not only are there hundreds of miles of marvellous beaches all around the continent, with climates to invite people to them, but the cities spill onto the beach...  

Early paintings of the Aborigines, with idyllic scenes of their picnics or barbecues, portray an enjoyment of leisure which contrasted with the busy-ness of the new settlers. Tench wrote matter-of-factly that “All savages hate toil, and place happiness in inaction: and neither the arts of civilized life can be practised, or the advantages of it felt, without application and labour”. Here he sums up the threat such indolence would pose to the established order if the new settlers were to emulate their behaviour, according pleasure a higher value than industry and adopting instead an attitude to work summed up in verse in the Bulletin in 1907:

I’m a vagrant free from labour,  
Work was never meant for me...  
And I’m quite content to idle.  
Doing nothing by the sea.  

All the city work and clamour  
And the clang of wheel and hammer  
Never did my soul enamour,  
Now I laze by shadowed lee,  
Where the sleepy wave is creaming,  
Yellow sand, and free from scheming.  

Emulate the lizard, dreaming,  
Doing nothing by the sea.  

Like the beach itself, the idle drifters “doing nothing by the sea” could only be seen as insignificant, non-contributors to the building of the new civilization.

**Hegemonic values, the bush and the beach**

From the beginnings of settlement many newcomers responded with delight to the beauty of the natural landscape: Eric Rolls states that he has found “close to 200 rapturous descriptions of Australia by early observers, many of them unpublished.”

Captain John Hunter even discerned the hand of a benevolent Providence at work in the way the Aborigines were provided with shelter without effort:

> Their ignorance in building is very amply compensated by the kindness of nature in the remarkable softness of the rocks... They [the Aborigines] generally shelter themselves in such cavities or hollows in the rocks upon the sea shore...

And Alan Frost concludes that

> in general, those who inhabited the County of Cumberland between 1788 and 1840 found a pleasant climate, benign air, relative plenty, convenient access, welcoming mien... frequent beauty, and difficulties less than those in England.

The beauty of the Australian landscape inspired many painters, poets and other writers. Nevertheless, many representations of the bush and nature in Australia are less positive. They relate to the harshness and indifference of the land, and thus the difficulty of surviving on it. They dwell on the stoical, pioneering virtues of endurance and acceptance of adversity and failure. They portray the bush, or the desert, as a place of escape from an unsatisfying society, where spirituality can be developed in solitary communion with the land.

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44 Frost, “The Conditions of Early Settlement”, p.79.
Why, out of the many representations of the bush which could be constructed from the evidence, did “the harshness and indifference of the land” become so potent? The projection onto the landscape of the new settlers’ sense of their own alienation was one obvious factor. but Turner also points out that, from a Marxist point of view, seeing the Australian context in terms of a hostile and intransigent nature allows social discontent to be displaced, to be projected onto a set of conditions (the immensity of the bush) in which the individual is “naturally” impotent. He points out that we perversely enshrine harsh and bizarre aspects of the land in our image of national character. We are boastful about our failures - Gallipoli, for example. He concludes that myth-making which enshrines our expectation that enterprise will lead to failure has two important functions: to find within (that is, to retreat to) nature in order to discover imaginary resolutions to conflicts which are insoluble within culture; and to focus on those aspects of culture which most actively justify and naturalise one’s position in culture - in fact, which will persuade acquiescence in hegemony.

The myth of the bush functions ideologically in its role as challenger and leveller. The problem of survival on the land sets limits to personal achievement and to personal endeavour. The land cannot be mastered, so the real heroism lies in surviving it. This strengthens an ideology which depends on the necessity of accepting personal and socioeconomic limitations, and of settling for survival (“the battler”) as the highest good. This is a myth which withdraws from the individual most possibilities of change, or of the assertion of personal imperatives.

There is ample evidence to support Turner’s view of the prevalence of “notions of futility, dispossession and powerlessness” in Australian fiction. Even in children’s literature, the bush appears early as an agent of destruction: although the family in Seven Little Australians (1894) lives in a suburb of Sydney, Judy is crushed by the bough of a eucalypt while staying on a country property. While books such as Dot and the Kangaroo (1899) and May Gibb’s Gumnut Babies (1916) present a mostly benign picture of the bush, in novels of the 1960s such as Ivan Southall’s Hill’s End

(1962) and *Ash Road* (1965), and Joan Phipson’s *The Way Home* (1973), the bush demonstrates the helplessness of humans in a meaningless universe.\(^{47}\) In adult fiction, Rufus Dawes dies after a life of undeserved, unremitting suffering in *For the Term of His Natural Life*.\(^{48}\) In Henry Lawson’s short stories, brief spurts of bleak, ironic or insane humour only serve to highlight the hopeless circumstances of the characters he portrays: to survive is the best one can hope for, to succeed beyond hope or expectation. Richard Mahony in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* is defeated both by his own insanity and his self-destructive alienation from the land and its people. John Grant in *Wake in Fright* ends in the place he tried to leave at the beginning of the novel, stuck in the hell of the outback. It is hard to recall any winners. Dad in Steele Rudd’s *On Our Selection* and *Our New Selection* may become a Member of Parliament, but the humour of the stories only leavens the essential harshness, struggle and poverty of the lives of small selectors and their families. In *Oscar and Lucinda* the glass church which Oscar builds and in which he is swept to his death symbolises the absurdity and incongruity of his and Lucinda’s aspirations in the primitive land to which they have migrated. Turner concludes that “…a sense of personal and political powerlessness…has undoubted ideological consequences, encouraging conservatism and an unquestioning acquiescence in existing social conditions”.\(^{49}\)

In one respect the beach can also be said to uphold the hegemonic values Turner has identified: in its “uselessness” it is irrelevant to “the assertion of personal imperatives.” It exerts its seductive lure, encouraging the individual to give up the struggle for social change: “What’s the point of trying to create a better world? Let’s go to the beach.” In most respects, however, the beach and its associated pleasures is inimical to the dour endurance which features so largely in the bush myth. The “joy” described by Dinnerstein which has been identified here as being associated with the beach is highly subversive, as Fiske points out, drawing on the ideas of Barthes regarding *jouissance* (of an aesthetics of pleasure sited in the body), and of Foucault (with his notion of society replacing the prison as agent of social control):

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\(^{48}\) In the version of the story published in novel form: the serialised version ends more positively.
Pleasure, which affords the escape from this power...becomes an agent of subversion because it creates a privatized domain beyond the scope of a power whose essence lies in its omnipotence, its omnipresence. Showing that life is livable outside it denies it...The desires and pleasures of the body...are where the subversive meanings of the surf are potentially located...The body is the Achilles heel of hegemony...\(^{\text{50}}\)

Even while acknowledging the potential of the beach for subversion of the existing order, however, Fiske is pessimistic about its ability to resist the power of consumer capitalism:

\[\text{The beach and the surf are worked on by the culture so that their overflowing meanings are controlled and legitimized...What the culture is trying to do to the surf is to defuse its potential radicalism.}\(^{\text{51}}\)

Fiske describes the various ways in which hegemony seeks to incorporate the beach: through the marketing and promotion of surfing equipment, sporting competitions, advertising of banks, or soft drinks, or electronic software and so on; and concludes, in effect, that the beach has become an agent of the existing order: "it controls the desire for freedom and the threat of nature by transposing it into the natural [the natural being not nature, but culture's construction of it]".\(^{\text{52}}\)

The "surfing industry" is estimated to be worth around $7 billion dollars around the world each year, the Australian company Quiksilver alone having sales on the global market of $300 million per year. Products associated with surfing are promoted through surfing magazines, films and competitions, and surfers sponsored by these interests are towed out into the open ocean to catch waves as big as five-storey buildings for "fantastic" photographs, pushing beyond their limits, sometimes with fatal results:

\[\text{Turner, National Fictions, p.37.}\]
\[\text{Fiske, "Reading the Beach", pp.75, 74.}\]
\[\text{Fiske, "Reading the Beach", pp.76, 46.}\]
There's people now dying in Hawaii, you know, and I've had four good friends die, drown in the last 12 months nearly. Because people are just going too hard, and no-one is showing it [the ocean] the respect it deserves.\textsuperscript{53}

The global market for surfing products can be seen as an example of capitalism's relentless quest for profit and its apparent success in appropriating the archetype of the beach to its own purposes. Pearson argues that

\begin{quote}
The initially playful sport of surf bathing, free, unregulated and marginal to society became, and has continued to become, more highly organised, more regulated, more complex and ... more in tune with performance work values of the wider society.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Yet private freedom uncorrupted by the desire for belongings is more often attained than cultural critics are prepared to recognise. This freedom is symbolised in "Sunbaker" by Max Dupain, a classic of Australian photography. The man's body lies flat against the sand, warmed by the sun, drops glistening on his tanned arms and back indicating that he has just come out of the surf. Solitary, self-sufficient, serving no social purpose, he lies outside the constraints of hegemonic control.

He also illustrates what Sue Hailstone describes as the "pleasing frugality" of the beach,\textsuperscript{55} its capacity to give pleasure without a necessary investment in material equipment and accessories. Despite the efforts of marketers to alter this state of affairs, there are still plenty of people who "travel light" to the beach. The simplicity and ease possible in a beach lifestyle can be subversive of economic as well as social and moral order. A lifesaver told a story of his mates in the Bondi Surf Life Saving Club who lost their jobs in the Depression. They found that they could live without work by pooling their resources and living off the beach, fishing and taking shellfish. They helped needy members of the community by doing odd jobs, but virtually opted


\textsuperscript{55} Sue Hailstone. "The Special Place", in Encounter. ABC Radio National, 3 July 1996 [transcript].
out of the economy - “and I don’t think they would have ever got back into it except that the war came, and when one enlisted, mateship dictated that all followed”. ²⁵⁶

A World War I recruiting poster (page 31a) sought to awaken guilt in those who preferred to enjoy the surf rather than support their mates by enlisting. Thus war proved to be the ultimate pulling into line of those who dared to reject “the way things are meant to be”. Many lifesavers obeyed the poster’s command:

With the start of the first World War surf lifesavers enlisted en-masse.
Through the years from 1914 to 1918 surf life saving struggled to survive, principally because most club members enlisted. ²⁵⁷

It might seem that hegemony, the ruling social and political order, always eventually triumphs, just as men can never prevail against the vast indifference of the bush. Yet such a conclusion is an over-simplification - as “Sunbaker” reminds us, and as discussion further into this study will suggest.

The construction of national identity, the bush and the beach: the writers’ role

The ways in which writers and artists defined a newly emerging nation’s sense of itself by articulating and refining the various meanings of the bush outlined above has been well documented and analysed by literary historians and cultural critics and can only be summarised here. ²⁵⁸ The terms “Australia” and “Australians” had come into

²⁵⁶ Jack Butterfield, personal communication. His assertion is supported by the facts: 70% of lifesavers enlisted in the armed services in 1939 (Wells, Sunny Memories, p 121).
IT IS NICE IN THE SURF

BUT

What about THE MEN IN THE TRENCHES

GO AND HELP
general use as terms for the continent and its inhabitants as early as the 1820s, when Peter Cunningham described the difference between the ‘currency’ and ‘sterling’ inhabitants of the young colony in Two Years in New South Wales (1827). Ideas about what it meant to be Australian were developing throughout the nineteenth century; the real impetus, however, came in the 1880s and 90s, and was driven by a number of forces. Broadly, it was related to the rise of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe; but here, local conditions made the definition of “Australianness” a prominent and engrossing issue. Debates which would lead to the Federation of the colonies were under way; the native-born now outnumbered those born overseas; and writers were now sufficiently numerous, widely published and widely read, to form a new and influential intelligentsia. While historians have sought explanations of the bush myth in popular traditions of ballads and yarns among itinerant bush workers, and Ward argued that the distinctive ethos of the bush worker spread through society as a whole as an image of Australianness, Hodge, who summarises Ward’s thesis, acknowledges that

It was probably literature, being less class-bound and operating at a deeper level of consciousness, which was the more important force in the osmotic process [than trade unionism].

Other writers see the creation of the idea of the bushman as embodying national virtues as an entirely intellectual fabrication, a projection onto the outback of values idealised by an alienated urban intelligentsia.

In any case, qualities were ascribed to the bushman, the casually or precariously employed itinerant bush worker, which were famously summed up as “typically Australian” by Russel Ward:

[he] is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser.

Matthew Flinders had suggested the use of “Australia”, and it was promoted by Macquarie (Alan Frost, “Perceptions before 1855”, in A Penguin History of Australian Literature, chief editor Lauric Hergenhan, 1987, p.103).


ever willing ‘to have a go’ at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is ‘near enough’... He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority... Yet he is very hospitable and above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin... 63

As early as 1897 Francis Adams in *The Australians* had written that the bushman was “the one powerful and unique national type yet produced in Australia”; and it seemed that the concentration of representations - by immensely popular writers like Lawson, Paterson, Furphy, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Will Ogilvie, and so on and on - of the bush and the men of the bush at the end of the nineteenth century reinforced a belief that the traits attributed to the bushmen epitomised the “Australianness” that was now so valued.

Another legend associated with the bush, not as closely tied to the idea of national identity but profoundly influential, was pioneering – a legend which, like that of the bushman, was promoted through literature and art. As John Hirst points out, “pioneers” originally meant immigrants who had come to the colonies in their early years; but by the 1890s it had come to mean those who first settled and worked the land. The pioneers came to be celebrated in “a nationalist legend which deals in an heroic way with the central experience of European settlement in Australia: the taming of the new environment to man’s use.” 64 The large claim advanced for the rural pioneers was that they *made the land* through their labour:

They toiled and they fought through the shame of it -
Through wilderness, flood, and drought;
They worked, in the struggles of early days,
Their sons’ salvation out.
The white girl - wife in the hut alone,
The man on the boundless run,

The miseries suffered, unvoiced, unknown -
And that’s how the land was won.
(Henry Lawson, “How the Land Was Won”) 65

And, more recently, Les Murray celebrates those who worked the land in “Noonday Axeman”:

A hundred years of clearing, splitting, sawing,
a hundred years of timbermen, ringbarkers, fencers
and women in kitchens, stoking loud iron stoves
year in, year out, and singing old songs to their children

have made this silence human and familiar... 66

All of those who worked the land could be included in the category of pioneer: squatters, selectors, small farmers. Even the convicts were rehabilitated as pioneers, in Mary Gilmore’s succinct words:

I split the rock;
I felled the tree:
The nation was -
Because of me.
(Mary Gilmore, Old Botany Bay). 67

The legend of the pioneers was socially conservative in that it conflated groups with a relentless history of antagonism and conflict into one broad class – the admirable pioneers; but it was democratic in its simple belief that pioneering status had been attained by all who poured their energies into working the land. Paintings by McCubbin, Streton, Roberts, and many others celebrated the labours and the achievements of the pioneers in rendering pastoral what was formerly wilderness. Still today, in face of a rising chorus of environmentalist disapproval, land clearing goes on. There is apparently virtue in turning bush into farmland, and those who make it their life’s work are esteemed heroic; or battlers at least, “salt of the earth”. 68

Millions of dollars are contributed by city people for drought relief for farm families, while small city businesses go bankrupt unremarked. Even though European farming

68 A phrase which now has ironic meaning, given that rising levels of salinity are rendering useless much previously productive farmland.
methods may have irreversibly degraded Australia’s soils, admiration for those who fight adversity in the Australian outback, formerly the bush, is deeply rooted in one of the most enduring myths of Western culture – that of the virtues and the delights of the rural life. As Coral Lansbury reminds us in *Arcady in Australia*:

> From Hesiod to Virgil to Henry Vaughan the argument remained the same: ‘More happy, then, yea by much more happy than any King, if not nearer to a divine felicity is that person who lives and dwells in the Country upon the rents and profits of his own Grounds.’

The bush presented writers with a rich lode of meaning as they helped to shape Australians’ ideas about themselves. Was the beach ever utilised for a similar purpose? Evidence which would support an affirmative answer to this question is meagre. There is one interesting example in the late nineteenth century of a popular symbol which bore some relationship to the beach, at least in its title: the “little boy from Manly”, a cartoon character who first appeared in 1885 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and “for thirty years ... was to be Australia’s equivalent of England’s John Bull...”. The little boy from Manly symbolised the young nation – a “good” boy, son of the English motherland, innocent, good-hearted, vulnerable. However, dressed as he was in fussy middle-class clothes or a boy scouts’ uniform, his image embodied no associations with the beach, and it seems likely that he came from “Manly” because this suburb was universally known as a popular resort, epitomising the optimistic, go-ahead spirit to which the colonies aspired as they headed towards Federation.

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69 Eric Rolls, like Tim Flannery and many others, has documented and lamented this fact, while conceding that the early farmers “knew not what they did”:

> No-one can blame them for the devastation that they caused: this land was so different it was more a new planet than a new continent...The greatest mistake that the settlers made was to regard the land as something that needed European knowledge. If they had consulted the Aborigines, Australia would now be a healthier country. (A talk for the “Exchanges” Conference, Museum of Sydney, 23 July 1995).

70 Coral Lansbury, *Arcady in Australia: The Evocation of Australia in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*, Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1970, p.33. Lansbury argues that Australians accepted the transposition by English writers of the myth of Arcady into the Australian bush because it ennobled what were otherwise sad and sordid convict beginnings and the harshness of rural life. Les Murray also contrasts the attitudes of Athenian (city) and Boeotian (rural) civilizations in favour of Boeotia, while regarding Arcady as the city’s idea of the rural – an emasculation of Boeotian material (in “On Sitting Back and thinking about Porter’s Boeotia”, *The Peasant Mandarin: Prose Pieces*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978, p.176).

71 Richard White, “Young, White, Happy and Wholesome”, in *Inventing Australia*, pp.121-123.
Later, between the first and second World Wars, the lifesaver on the beaches became a national hero. Continuity in an important cultural tradition was maintained as the egalitarianism, absence of social distinctions, and mateship – the characteristics of the bushman - were emphasised as essential features of the lifesaving movement:

In it [the Surf Life Saving Club] we see democracy function as it was meant to. There are no barriers of creed, class or color.\textsuperscript{72}

Members are drawn from all grades of society and the surf club is a great leveller.\textsuperscript{73}

All these things [social divisions] are forgotten in the wonderful spirit of humanitarian mateship.\textsuperscript{74}

People flocked to the beaches to watch surf carnivals, thrilling in their glamour and inspired by newspaper reports of brave rescues. The cult of the lifesaver was essentially democratic, endorsed by the community at large and promoted through the popular media – newspapers, magazines, movie newsreels and advertising. But while Lawson, Paterson, and many other writers articulated the legend of the bushman, no famous writers are associated with the construction of the lifesaver as national hero.

The pioneer legend includes women as their men’s helpmates in creating homes out of wilderness, as exemplified in George Essex Evans’ well-known “Women of the West” (although there are some feminist reservations about the portrayal of women as pioneers\textsuperscript{75}).

The Hearts that made the Nation
Were the Women of the West.
But the proudly egalitarian national stereotype of the bushman was in fact "prescriptive, unitary, masculinist and excluding". Its omission of women and the reasons for this exclusion have been comprehensively demonstrated and canvassed in recent feminist analyses. And the lifesavers, in image and in fact, maintained the tradition of a national category which excluded women. Women's lifesaving clubs were formed almost as early as those of the men, and twenty thousand people watched the Manly women's team compete at a surf carnival there in 1912; but the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia banned women from gaining the bronze medallion necessary for them to qualify as lifesavers, and the official ban on women lifesavers was maintained despite the depletion of the ranks of lifesavers in World War II.

There is, then, a strength and a continuity in a cultural tradition which holds to, and reflects similarities over time between, these different national stereotypes. But while literature played a critical role in constructing ideas about the bush, it has not made a similar contribution to the construction of ideas about the beach in Australia.

Conclusion

The bush in many of its connotations has been useful in maintaining and strengthening acceptance of the status quo. Desire for land ownership and for the improvement of the land in a quest for status and for material betterment, and in compensation for the rootlessness and sense of exile characteristic of a migrated people; highlighting of values and virtues associated with the struggle for survival in a harsh, unyielding land; disapproval of indolence and hedonism, with an associated resistance to "going native", to adopting any of the attitudes and practices of the indigenous inhabitants - all are associated with the bush, and all operate in favour of the established social order.

What are we to say of the beach and its potential for similarly upholding hegemonic values? Enjoyment of the beach - with its denial of ownership and of opportunities for accumulation and profit, indifference to work-oriented goals, taking of pleasure in the body and in the moment - is in many ways inimical to such values.

While there is a correspondence between the ideological utility of the bush and its pervasive presence in Australian art and literature, to focus simply on this correspondence would be to oversimplify the multitude and the richness of the ways in which the bush has been and continues to be imaginatively interpreted and transformed. In concentrating on the literary treatment of human efforts to tame and exploit the bush, it is important to acknowledge also how often readers were inspired to respond to the beauty of the bush in works such as Henry Kendall’s “Bell-Birds”, Cuthbertson’s “An Australian Sunrise”, Paterson’s

... vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars...

and so many other word pictures of enduring appeal. In the words of Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra

The western is a specific genre among many that construct the American myth: categories of the Outback are part of the very conditions of Australian mythology... there is no fixed meaning or invariant reality value for the Australian landscape. On the contrary, it is as potent as it is precisely because it is so variable a resource and so pervasive a phenomenon. 79

If one simply takes into account the distribution of the population, the fact that the majority of Australians have always lived in town or suburb, and that the bush portrayed by so many of our writers is remote from their lives, then the influence of the bush in our literature might seem disproportionate. And models of cultural identity unrelated to the bush have been proposed. Wilkes noted dualistic and antagonistic perspectives on Australian cultural development as endemic, identifying and summing up alternative versions of identity in the contrast within the title of his

discussion, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn*. Contributors to Peter Coleman’s *Australian Civilization* criticised what the editor labelled “Australianism” - the popular radical nationalism identified by Ward - as “an uncivilized movement” and explored aspects of Australian life which they felt were overlooked within that tradition.

Yet one still needs to explain why, of all possible representations of Australianness, the idea of the Bush, and of qualities associated with life in the Bush, have been so potent and enduring: for Australians overseas, it is traditionally the scent of eucalyptus which has most readily evoked tears and thoughts of home. The cogent arguments of cultural analysts demolishing myths of the bush overlook a phenomenon beyond facts and figures: that from the earliest days of settlement the bush has embodied the spirit and the challenge of the new land - alien and unwelcoming wilderness, to be subdued and tamed; potential wealth, to be owned, cultivated, grazed, built on, or mined; nourishment for the soul in its vast spaces, its wild beauty and tranquillity; a place of escape, of meditation, of spiritual and emotional sustenance.

Writers who came to be celebrated as definitively Australian responded to these nuances, “singing the land”, bringing a nation into being. No matter that Harpur pursued intellectual and philosophical themes in his poetry, Kendall wrote religious poetry, and Adam Lindsay Gordon wrote “The Swimmer”; it is for their bush poems that they are remembered and celebrated. The *Bulletin*, especially in its Red Page, certainly published a great deal of writing on bush subjects, and A.G. Stephens omitted most city-influenced verse and prose from the collected editions of *Bulletin* material he published around the turn of the century; but it is arguable how much this selectivity shaped, and how much it reflected, the tastes of the reading public.

Is the apparent absence of the beach from our literature due to its lack of the kinds of subtle and complex meanings which the bush has held since the beginnings of

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European settlement? Or is it because writers have been unable or reluctant to respond to whatever cultural meanings are associated with the beach? The bush clearly gained enormous cultural significance early in our history, acquiring a cluster of uniquely local connotations. If the beach was similarly “Australianised”, when and how did it acquire this specific cultural significance? In order to answer these questions, the story of the way a distinctively Australian beach came into being has to be told; for knowledge of this history is needed before the place of the beach in Australian literature can be understood and assessed.
CHAPTER TWO

THE EVOLUTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN BEACH

Although the bush gained early ascendancy in the imagination of those who settled
the land from 1788 onwards, the first experience of the Europeans was of the beach
rather than the bush. The natural consequence of the early navigators, explorers and
settlers travelling to Australia by sea was that their first visual and physical contact
with the original inhabitants occurred on the shores, the beaches, of the “new” land.
The first recorded sighting of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the east coast of Australia
was described by James Cook in the diary of his first voyage: “[we] were so near the
Shore as to distinguish several people upon the Sea beach”.¹

When the First Fleet arrived the Governor of the new Colony, Captain Arthur Phillip,
reported observing some natives on the shores of Botany Bay as the Fleet prepared to
enter the Bay. Even before the first settlement was established in Port Jackson,
Phillip noted on 22 January 1788 that he had named one of the inlets Manly Cove
because of the confidence and manly behaviour shown by the “natives” there ²—
thereby naming the place which later became part of one of Sydney’s premier beach
resorts.

After the new settlers had landed on “the fatal shore”,³ the earliest interactions
between them and the Aborigines took place around the beaches of Port Jackson,
Botany Bay, Pittwater and Broken Bay. The newcomers observed that “the natives”
subsisted mainly on the fish and shellfish which they drew from the waters
surrounding the settlement. The early diarists described in some detail the different
functions of men and women with respect to fishing: the way they broiled the fish
they had caught over little fires in their canoes; the fashioning of fishhooks and the

¹ The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771, edited by J.C. Beaglehole, Cambridge: Cambridge
² Governor Arthur Phillip, The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay... & Etc., printed for John
Stockdale, Piccadilly, 1789, a facsimile edition 1982. Richmond, Victoria: Hutchison (Australia) Pty
Ltd., p.50.
construction of canoes. There was a division of labour between the sexes, with women catching fish from the canoes, swimming or diving, the men spearing fish from the rocks, as shown in the picture on page 42a. For those original inhabitants first encountered by the new settlers, the coastline with its beaches, its inlets and its edging waters, was the site and focus of their subsistence and way of life.

The Aborigines were observed to be proficient swimmers. In 1791 Bennelong and several others swam out to rescue a group of settlers whose boat had overturned in Farm Cove; they returned those rescued to shore and dried out their clothes over a fire. The name “bogie hole” often used up until quite recent times for a swimming-place derived from an Aboriginal word meaning to bathe or swim. Among the Tasmanian Aborigines the women did all the diving for shellfish:

These women seem quite at home in the water, and frequently immerse their faces to enable them to see objects at the bottom. When they discover the object of their search, they dive, often using the long stems of the kelp to enable them to reach the bottom; these they handle as dextrously as a sailor would a rope in descending.

This is an evocative image for anyone who has watched the tan-brown forests of giant kelp writhing in the waters around Tasmania. In Queensland, an observer saw Aboriginal women playfully “bending up both legs and holding with their hands to each ankle” while jumping into the water - the “bombing” more often associated with adolescent boys today.

The example presented by the Aborigines to the newcomers was one of enjoyment of

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3 A phrase first used in a convict ballad written ca. 1825-30 and used by Robert Hughes as the title of his major work on Australia's convict origins.
Cook had observed this separation between the roles of men and women in the “primitive” societies encountered during the voyage - in Tierra del Fuego, Tahiti, New Zealand, and now, it was evident, in New South Wales. In this one respect at least, the settlers must have been reassured that the “natives”, in other ways so alien, were like them.
5 Oxford Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms, edited by G.A. Wilkes, new edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. Wilkes notes the first recording of the word in an utterance by Colbee, one of the Aborigines captured by Governor Phillip as reported in Daniel Southwell’s papers. When I was a child we called the smaller rock pool at the northern end of Bondi beach the bogie hole.
7 Stell, Half the Race. p.4.
the sheltered beaches as places for relaxation and leisure. A painting by the convict Thomas Watling from the early 1790s, *A Groupe on the North Shore of Port Jackson*, shows

...a classic Australian scene, a barbecue on the beach...it is certainly typical that a man, not a woman, is in charge of the grilling. The beach is a place of pleasure and peace...8

Similar scenes of enjoyment were drawn or painted by Piron in 1792 (of Tasmanian Aborigines); by De Saison in the 1820s in *Sailors Fraternizing, Jervis Bay*; and by George Angas in 1844 or 1845 in *Rapid Bay with an Encampment of Yankalillah Blacks*.

These idyllic images are part of a melange of first impressions, many of them not so positive in their impact. A Dutch sailor, Jan Carstensz, sighting "natives" on the coast of New Holland, had noted that "The Inhabitants... are the most wretched and poorest creatures that I have ever seen."9 The first English vessel to visit the Australian coast was the *Cygnet* in 1688, with one of those on board, William Dampier, describing the Aborigines around the coast of Western Australia in similarly negative terms:

The Inhabitants of this country are the miserablest People in the world. The Hodmadods of Monomatapa, though a nasty People, yet for Wealth are Gentlemen to these: who have no Houses and skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry and Fruits of the Earth, Ostrich Eggs, etc. as the Hodmadods have: and setting aside their Humane Shape, they differ but little from Brutes10.

Cook’s opinion of the Aborigines contrasted greatly with Dampier’s; the normally taciturn Cook expatiated at (for him) unusual length on their positive qualities, seeing virtue in the lack of possessions which had so offended Dampier:

From what I have said of the Natives of New-Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans: being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in

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Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and the sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life, they covet not Magnificent Houses, Household-stuff etca, they live in a warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air, so that they have very little need of Clothing...for many to whom we gave Cloth etca to, left it carelessly upon the Sea beach and in the woods as a thing they had no manner of use for. In short they seem'd to set no Value upon any thing we gave them...this in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessaries of Life and that they have no superfluities.11

These totally different judgements of the Aboriginal inhabitants seen or encountered on the beaches set the tone for the volatile and contradictory responses of later explorers and settlers. They laid the foundation for the complexity of emotional reactions to the Aborigines, so tragic in its consequences, which persists up to and including the present day and exemplified both the European repulsion from and attraction to a people with a way of life and a system of values so alien as to be incomprehensible.

Evidence of the early popularity of bathing and swimming

Early records suggest that the convicts, the soldiers and the early colonists needed no urging to follow the example of the Aborigines and to enter the water - in fact, they persisted in doing so despite all officialdom’s efforts to discourage them. Cannon conjectures that “no doubt the hotter climate, combined with easy access to beaches and rivers [and bay and harbour shores] encouraged a good deal of bathing simply for the sake of coolness in summer.”12 Most of the First Fleet diarists allude to the heat of that first summer, Watkin Tench noting that it “felt like the blast of a heated oven...it was allowed by every person, to surpass all that they had before felt, either there or in any other part of the world.”13

13 Tench, Sydney’s First Four Years, p.273.
By 1803 bathing was so widespread that the Governor felt it necessary to restore some decorum, using the dangerous creatures lurking in the water as an excuse for what may have been an attempt to uphold propriety:

This Bay and Harbour in general, - being unfortunately full of Voracious Sharks and Stingrays only, it is recommended to the Convicts not to go into the water without the utmost precaution and they are positively prohibited from bathing in front of the Encampment.\(^14\)

Whether or not the convicts heeded this injunction, the shore of Woolloomooloo Bay remained a very popular bathing spot, providing trees and rocks for shade, for diving, and for concealment while changing. The Ben Bolt, an abandoned hulk, was sunk near the shore and wooden fences built out to it to form the sides of an enclosure, supposedly as some protection against sharks (but since one could dive and swim underwater around the submerged sides of the hulk out into the harbour, the protection was more psychological than real).

Lack of familiarity with the water meant that few of those who lived in Britain or Ireland could swim, so one might assume that this applied also to the colonists. The evidence, however, fragmentary though it is, suggests that the ability to swim was widespread. It is likely that some learnt the skill (and the pleasure to be derived from swimming) by watching the original inhabitants enjoying themselves in the water.\(^15\)

In the early 1830s, part of Surgeon Peter Cunningham’s assessment of the characteristics of the new generation of Sydney’s inhabitants, the currency lads and lasses, included the observation that “They [the girls] are all fond of frolicking in the water, those living near the sea can usually swim and dive like water-hens.”\(^16\)

By 1834 the Sydney Gazette of 18 February pronounced that “bathing is now the favoured recreation in Sydney”; a visitor observed that “Swimming matches...take place occasionally and are well contested...It is an amusement to which the youth of


\(^{15}\) Stell, Half the Race, p.4.

New South Wales are very partial, scarcely anyone over the age of three or four being ignorant of the art."17 In 1847 a writer in Heads of the People referred to a bathing place near Mrs Macquarie’s Chair (in the Botanic Gardens) and "lower down" another bathing place called "the steps":

The steps were favoured by those children who had not yet learned to swim and could only splash and paddle like a brood of young ducks in a horse-pond.18

Bathing seems to have gained early popularity as an enjoyable activity in its own right, not just as a way of cooling off in hot weather. The Sydney Gazette of 13 June 1829 noted that "a number of bathers are still to be seen every morning, notwithstanding the sharpness of the air in the early part of the day."19

Other visitors observed that "So much...was bathing the fashion that it was impossible to walk out any time of the day, by the waterside about Sydney, without being annoyed by bathers in all directions..."20 and "Where there is so much bathing it may naturally be supposed there are good swimmers, and Sydney is celebrated for them."21

The first swimming club noted by historians of English seaside resorts is Brighton Swimming Club, established in 1858.22 In Hobart, a Bathing Society had been established by 1849, the Colonial Times of 16 January 1849 commenting that

A more delightful exercise cannot be found...The bathing-houses erected by the society are very commodious, and now that the season has commenced, have both morning and evening a very respectable attendance, and the situation is so admirably selected for those who are learning to swim, that at all times the water is from three to thirteen feet deep.

18 Heads of the People, 16 October 1847, p.6.
19 Quoted in J.W.C. Cumins, Their Chastity was not too Rigid: Leisure Times in Early Australia, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty Ltd., 1979, p.295.
20 W.R. Govett in 1837, quoted in Cumins, Chastity, p.156.
Cumes concludes that swimming must have been a more general recreation than written records disclose, and sees this as evidence that an indigenous style of recreation and amusement was developing. He also cites records of people bathing in Perth in 1833 and 1837, in the Yarra near Melbourne in 1844, at Glenelg in 1849 and 1850, and speculates that many earlier colonists must have enjoyed themselves by swimming from the earliest days of settlement.

For a brief time, then, it might have seemed that the new settlers would follow the Aboriginal example in freely enjoying the opportunities for refreshment and pleasure that bathing and swimming in pristine waters and a warm climate afforded them. As they sought to construct a congenial way of life in their new environment, however, an idea of the beach which they brought with them from England - the beach as seaside holiday resort - soon became more salient.

The English idea of the seaside resort

In England the century from about 1660 onwards had seen the rise of the spa town as a focus for the social life of the aristocracy and the landed gentry. The drinking of spa water was considered to have therapeutic benefits, and this became the ostensible reason for visiting spa towns in the fashionable season and engaging in the hectic round of balls and social amenities they provided. A hierarchy prevailed among the spa towns reflecting the social position of their clientele.

By the mid-eighteenth century the seaside resort was developing as an adjunct to the spa season. As spa water was considered to be healthful, so also the drinking of seawater was successfully promoted as a remedy for such afflictions as scurvy, jaundice, gonorrhoea and gout. Those who had patronised the spas now also visited

23 Cumes Chastity, p.298.
24 This account is summarised from Walton, The English Seaside Resort; Ruth Manning-Sanders, Seaside England, London: B.T. Batsford, 1951; Anderson and Swinglehurst, The Victorian and Edwardian Seaside; and Corbin, Lure of the Sea.
the seaside resorts, often drinking copious quantities of seawater and bathing from beaches or bathing machines.\textsuperscript{25}

Corbin dates the invention of the beach in modern Western culture from the discovery of the virtues of sea water during this period.\textsuperscript{26} Dr Russell, a leading protagonist, specified the features of "the salubrious beach" in some detail. It should be "neat and tidy"; away from any river mouth, so as to ensure that the waves would be high and the water sufficiently saline. It should be sandy and flat, making it easier to cross in a Bath chair. The shore should be bordered by cliffs and dunes suitable for walking and horseback riding.\textsuperscript{27}

The Prince of Wales set the seal of royal approval on the then small resort of Brighton by visiting it in 1783 and building his Royal Pavilion there. As with the spa towns, a hierarchy of prestige developed among the seaside resorts, which by late in the century had superseded the spas as \textit{the place to stay} for those who wished to be in the forefront of fashion.

By the early nineteenth century the seaside holiday was well established as a feature of the social calendar. The provision of stagecoach services to the resorts broadened the social composition of the visiting population as the middle classes, ever anxious to emulate their betters, began to spend two or three weeks at the seaside in summer. With the coming of the railways from the 1840s onwards, the numbers of holidaymakers increased exponentially. By late in the century even members of the working class took advantage of cheap excursion fares for both day trips to resorts and for holidays, as the custom of taking a holiday became a possibility for them as well. Hotels of varying levels of style and luxury were built, with visitors of more

\textsuperscript{25} Hard as it is for us to imagine today, the drinking of seawater in quite copious amounts was a medically approved fad in the late eighteenth century. Manning-Sanders quotes a visitor to Lyme Regis in 1792: "Decent looking men used to go down to the beach three or four times in as many hours, and drink a pint of sea-water each time" (Seaside England, p.10).

\textsuperscript{26} Corbin, \textit{Lure of the Sea}, p.70. Corbin's book is a fascinating, scholarly cultural history which attempts to examine "emotionally charged systems", tracing the origins of desires and the ways in which suffering and pleasure were experienced, leading to "the desire for the shore that swelled and spread [in western Europe] between 1750 and 1840."

\textsuperscript{27} Corbin, \textit{Lure of the Sea}, p.70.
modest means occupying lodging-houses or renting cheaper, more primitive forms of accommodation.

What attracted people to the seaside in such numbers, and from such a range of social classes? At first, when the resort population was more socially exclusive, the attraction was supposedly the opportunity for therapy and improvement rather than pleasure. Bathing was “a grim and hasty ritual, undertaken in the chill of early morning”, most often from a bathing machine, a kind of caravan-cum-dressing room on wheels pulled by a horse down to the water’s edge, wherein the bather could undress and enter the water (usually naked, with privacy provided by immersion in the water). Immersion was normally brief, half an hour at most, in some places assisted by formidable women called “dippers”, who would grasp a hesitant would-be bather and plunge him or her into the water (the victim was usually a child or its mother – the bathing-machine was less popular with men, who ran into the sea naked until restrictions on this freedom made retreat to the bathing-machine more common for them):

A good many take this step because they think it a duty if they go to the seaside, and a good many think they enjoy it or ought to enjoy it because they see others doing so, and yet they have a very gasping pleasure after all.²³

The shock to the body of the cold water was considered to be beneficial, and was sometimes followed by a massage with seaweed and a rest. Feeling virtuous at having endured this procedure, the holidaymaker could proceed to enjoy the other amenities provided at the resort. The assembly room and circulating library, with coffee or tea rooms attached, became the focus for social gatherings. Those of a less frivolous bent might engage in the popular passion for collecting pebbles, shells, seaweed and assorted marine life, a craze which was at its height in the 1850s and 1860s but had largely died out by the end of the century, largely because it had resulted in the destruction of most easily accessible marine specimens – a destruction lamented by Edmund Gosse in *Father and Son*.

The ring of living beauty drawn about our shores was a very fragile one.... These rock-basins... exist no longer, they are profaned and emptied and vulgarised. An army of “collectors” has passed over them, and ravaged every corner of them. The fairy paradise has been violated.  

As the century progressed the drinking of seawater and emphasis on bathing as therapy declined and the bracing effects of sea air were more widely celebrated. Bathing-machines began to decline in use and numbers, and the pursuit of pleasure as the real aim (apart from keeping up with the fashion) of the seaside holiday was implicitly acknowledged and accepted.

Many forms of entertainment were provided for resort visitors, sometimes by vigorous private entrepreneurs, more often, and particularly in the case of successful resorts like Blackpool and Bournemouth, by local government, which generally assumed control over the regulation of seaside resorts throughout Britain. Piers were built, at first for the landing of people and supplies arriving at resorts by steamers. But their attraction as places for promenading over the sea, for fishing, for viewing back towards the resort and the coastline, and as places on which entertainment could be provided, soon became evident. Promenades were also built along the seaside, gardens were landscaped, and the 1870s saw a vogue for aquaria. Characteristic seaside entertainments were band recitals, black-and-white minstrel shows, Punch and Judy shows, and donkey rides and stalls on the beach. So many vendors set up their wares on the sand that the Blackpool Town Clerk in 1895 listed 316 “standings of the foreshore” and there were 35 phrenologists on the beach on one long weekend holiday.

Many and varied were the amusements provided for those who crowded into the resorts intent on enjoying themselves. Piers were very popular for promenading and as a site for band concerts and amusements, there was usually a turnstile at the entrance to the pier through which those who wished to stroll on the pier paid to enter. No two resorts catered for exactly the same market. Collectively they provided an escape from the crowded towns and cities, and from the formalities of everyday life. By the twentieth century they had became the most popular type of holiday for the

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English. The craze for the seaside spread to Europe, with a delay of some thirty years as it made its way along the seacoasts. Patterns of social life evolved, based on the English model. But “English inventiveness” was fundamental in the development of seaside holiday-making in Europe, with the aristocracy playing the pioneering role there, as in England.

Adoption by the colonists of the English idea of the seaside resort

When the first colony was established in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century, the English seaside resort was growing in popularity from its fairly modest beginnings some forty years or so earlier. Since it was still the exclusive preserve of the higher orders of society, its social cachet would have been considerable in the eyes of the earliest free settlers; however, its relevance to the struggling infant colonies must have seemed remote. In any case, the pleasures of swimming and bathing were readily accessible around the shores of the new settlement.

With the end of convict transportation and a rapid increase in the number of free settlers emigrating to Australia, colonial society grew large and complex enough to contain an element characterised by “excessive concern with status and respectability”, the members of which now possessed the resources to reproduce in the new land the practices, fashions and customs of the homeland most of them had left behind. From the 1830s onwards, their forms of relaxation were modelled on those of the English gentry. The spa tradition was copied and about 200 spas were established in Australia wherever springs containing suitable minerals had been found. Bath Houses on the English model were built for users of a special class,
such as the Military Bath House in Erskine Street fronting onto Darling Harbour in 1822, and the Governor’s Bath House in the Domain in 1828.  

“Seaside resorts” also began to be established, promoted for their therapeutic value and bracing clean air. In the 1840s, Botany Bay first became established as a celebrated resort, with two good hotels, Clontarf and Watson’s Bay were popular resorts reached by ferry. In 1840 Port Melbourne, then called Sandridge, was promoted as a health resort, and in 1845 Brighton became popular after a particularly severe winter and a whooping cough epidemic in Melbourne. In the 1850s Swansea in Tasmania was promoted for its sea-bathing, St Kilda was connected to Melbourne by steam rail in 1857, and Cremorne Gardens, opening in March 1856, was proclaimed by the Herald as “among the best of those places of a holiday resort of a superior order in Sydney.”  

Cleveland and Sandgate were favourite Queensland seaside resorts in the 1860s, while Glenelg and Robe in South Australia acquired the status of resort at about the same time (Robe becoming fashionable because of the patronage of Governor Sir James Fergusson). A leader article in the Newcastle Chronicle of 17 November 1866 noted that

Victorians, not content with their charming retreats at Brighton and St Kilda, flock in scores across to Launceton and Hobart Town, and there while away weeks, and even months, just as the weary and smoke-begrimed Londoner quits the glowing pave of the “little village” for the wooing air or salt-fresh gales of Scarborough and Dover...We are well aware that it will be years (perhaps centuries) before any approach to the English standard of perfection can be made in these remote offshoots to the British crown...

The most ambitious attempt to create a popular seaside resort was probably the plan of Henry Gilbert Smith to build “the Brighton of Sydney” at Manly. An English businessman and entrepreneur, Smith recognised Manly’s potential, and his application for subdivision included a note to the effect that

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36 Newcastle Chronicle, 17 November 1866, p.2.
...the object has been to give such a character to these Marine Retreats that they may become favourite Resorts of the Colonists. The promenades and squares indicated on the plan will be the means of ensuring health and amusement to residents and visitors.17

In 1853 Smith bought or leased much land at Manly and proceeded to develop the area. Hotels and guest houses began to proliferate, and Manly was promoted as a holiday destination for country people needing an annual dose of sea air. Smith named a broad street linking the harbour side of Manly to the ocean beach the Corso, after the Corso in Rome. The walkways along the ocean beach were named South and North Steyne, after the thoroughfare at Brighton. A company was set up to provide ferry services from Circular Quay to Manly, and families travelled there in their best clothes to “take the air”. Fairy Bower, a small ocean beach to the south of the main ocean beach, became a popular spot for picnics and church outings. The area was laid out with ornamental seats, winding paths and steps and a tea room on the English model.

Smith also made it his business to “improve” the look of Manly by planting Norfolk Island pine trees everywhere. Triglone states that he has been unable to discover Smith’s reasons for this choice, speculating that the verticality of the pines provided a contrast to the low native heath; they might also have been thought to help prevent sand movement.38 One could also suggest that the characteristic pine shape and colouring of the Norfolk pines gave a more European look to the beach than the cabbage tree palms and wildflowers which were indigenous to the area, and that they provided a “frame” through which the ocean could be viewed. Whatever the reason, the planting of Norfolk pines is a fashion that has been copied on many other Australian beaches, extending up to some of the Gold Coast beaches in Queensland, down to Tasmania, and across to Cottesloe and Scarborough in Western Australia.

The nineteenth century mania for collecting plant, animal and marine specimens which stimulated the craze for collecting shells and seaweed at the English resorts was

38 Triglone, History, p.36.
also promoted here. *Cassell’s Household Guide* recommended these pursuits as a learning device for the young, while the Australian *Building Times* in 1859 commended seaweed and seashell collecting as a “field of interesting occupation for the leisure of the gentle sex.” Seaweeds were pressed and dried, mounted or arranged to form a picture. Shell collecting was described by *Cassells* as a “never-ending occupation, of the most useful and instructive kind,” and shell collections, like stamp collections, were popular.

As at English seaside resorts, piers and jetties began to be built around the Australian coastline. The jetty at Glenelg was one of the earliest to be built, being constructed within four years of Glenelg becoming a municipality and opened by the Governor in April 1859. A kiosk and an aquarium were later built on the jetty. A token cargo of imported produce was unloaded at the opening ceremony, but it was not until 1865 that a “genuine” cargo (of coal) was unloaded at the jetty. Interest in attracting shipping to Glenelg lapsed, however, and the jetty was only used by anglers and holidaymakers.

Some piers were used for landing passengers and supplies by sailing boat or steamer. But the jetty at Cottesloe, built in 1906, was always intended “to be used for promenade and pleasure only.” Reasons given for building the jetty at Cottesloe - to make life easier for anglers; to provide opportunities for visitors to promenade, close to the ocean without necessarily swimming in it; and as an attraction to draw visitors to the sea beach and to add to the means of entertainment (for example by band concerts) - probably applied to many of the piers and jetties built at other resorts, the perceived profitability and popularity of the English piers being an incentive to try to emulate that success here.

Built by the Cottesloe Roads Board, the precursor to the Cottesloe Municipal Council, the pier had a bandstand, was 382 feet in length, was

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40 “Loss of a Jetty”. *Historic Glenelg*, an article supplied by The Manager, City of Glenelg, S.A.
41 Information supplied by Pat Adamson, Secretary, The Cottesloe Society, 1996.
very popular and attracted huge crowds.\textsuperscript{42}

In Sydney's eastern suburbs, Coogee had its jetty; it also had the Palace Aquarium, opened in 1887, with associated swimming baths and amusement grounds with manicured lawns, grottoes of luxuriant tropical plants and large refreshment rooms. Bondi's Aquarium with its landscaped grounds, also opened in 1887. Wonderland City, an amusement complex straddling the headland at Fletcher's Glen, Tamarama, between Bondi and Bronte, contained sideshows, a switch-back scenic railway, slippery dips and underground rivers.\textsuperscript{43}

Meals or refreshments could be obtained at restaurants, hotels, or shops and stalls selling all kinds of food. Picnics, another English pastime transplanted to the colonies, were very popular among daytrippers. People dressed up in their best clothes, food was packed and transported in hampers, and at popular picnic spots there was often a kiosk where hot water could be obtained for making tea.

Thus the idea of the English seaside resort was copied in the colonial setting. Colonial society sought to reproduce in Australia the structures, features, fads and social complexities characteristic of English seaside resorts. As in so many other aspects of colonial culture, the ways things were done in the Home country were adopted irrespective of their suitability for the new environment. And the ascendancy of this imported model was aided and abetted by strong and sustained official opposition to unregulated bathing and swimming. This opposition was expressed and enforced through laws which significantly inhibited the development of a local beach culture.


\textsuperscript{43} Beside the Sea.
Laws against swimming and bathing and the reasons for them

In the early days of the English seaside resort in the mid-eighteenth century, mixed nude bathing was normal. This was the period when resorts were the preserve of the upper classes, with their relaxed attitudes to morality. As resorts became more popular, however, the middle classes, with their concern for respectability and propriety, set the moral tone at the resorts. Since “Leering through lorgnettes...was the favourite male pastime on the beaches of the day”\textsuperscript{44}, women began to wear a kind of flannel cloak to cover themselves during their ritual bathe, and mixed bathing was no longer practised - in Blackpool in 1788, for example, a bell was rung when it became the hour appointed for ladies to swim, and men were supposed to make themselves scarce. Regulation of bathing was often unwelcome, and controversy raged over restrictions on mixed and nude bathing. Rules were local, and their severity, and the rigour with which they were enforced varied for place to place and from time to time.

Hence at the time Australia was settled, permissiveness regarding “public decency” while bathing was gradually giving way in England to a moralistic disapproval of the mixing of the sexes and the sight of the naked human body, and a distaste among women for being ogled by men. The 1803 ban on bathing in front of the Encampment has already been noted. This was reinforced by an order by the Governor’s Secretary published in the \textit{Sydney Gazette} of 6 October 1810:

A very indecent and improper Custom having lately prevailed, of Soldiers, Sailors and Inhabitants of the Town bathing themselves at all hours of the Day at the Government Wharf, and also in the Dock-yard...no person shall Bathe at either of these places in future, at any Hour of the Day; ... the Sentinels...to apprehend and confine any Person transgressing this Order.

In 1833 bathing in the waters of Sydney Cove and Darling Harbour between the hours of 6 am and 8 pm was banned, these restrictions being extended to all beaches within view of a public place or resort in 1838.\textsuperscript{45} (Similar restrictions were introduced in

\textsuperscript{44}Corbin, \textit{Lure of the Sea}, p.77.

\textsuperscript{45}The relevant regulations were published in the N.S.W. Government Gazette no. 50, 13 February 1833, p.59, and no. 352, 22 August 1838, p.659 (relating to an Act of Parliament specifying police powers “for removing Nuisances and Obstructions...”). A note in the Government Gazette no. 1068, \textit{Continued on next page}
other colonies, and it was reported that when an attempt was made to prevent boys and men from swimming nude in the Yarra, they responded with a shower of stones). In Sydney there were sporadic reports of people defying these orders, and soldiers continued to bathe nude along the shores of Darling Harbour. However, the same W.R. Govett who complained about “being annoyed by bathers in all directions” wrote of the 1833 prohibition on bathing that it “was duly observed by the inhabitants.” One incentive to comply with laws regarding bathing was the imposition of fines. People could be fined up to a pound if caught - a considerable sum for a working man. Bathing and swimming in daylight, in the open, disappeared from the public gaze.

To enable law-abiding citizens to continue to enjoy bathing, baths were built - “a hasty repressive reaction to screen the nudity of the colonists who insisted on bathing in the sea.” They were well-screened from public view, with high wooden fences on the shore side, often completely enclosed by timber, with individual dressing-sheds along the walkways. The first public bath in Sydney harbour was completed in 1829; Adelaide Marine Baths were established in 1839 for “a respectable married female clientele previously accustomed to Baths in England”. By 1853 there were four Sydney Harbour baths for use by the public; and by 1882 there were at least five more. Some harbourside residences had their own private baths. Baths were also built in resorts in other states, a splendid establishment at St Kilda being completed in 1860. Baths also formed part of the attractions at popular resorts like Clifton Gardens, Manly, and Glenelg. There were separate men’s and women’s baths, or a few hours a week were set aside for women’s swimming, the baths being the preserve of men at other times.

The bathing machines which were such a feature of English seaside resorts began to appear here, another means of preserving the modesty of those who wished to bathe.

20 December 1901, refers to the 1838 Act but appears to be a re-statement required by the advent of Federation.
46 Waterhouse, Private Pleasures, p.41.
48 Harbourside and Ocean Pools: Historical Overview.
49 Stell, Half the Race, p.4.
It seems that they were used by well-off women as a way of gaining the privacy they deemed necessary. As early as 1827, a bathing machine built in Hobart became one of that town’s most fashionable amusements for women; there was a bathing machine at Glenelg in 1845. Wheeled bathing boxes such as those shown on page 58a appeared at Manly (South Steyne) in 1860, and at Coogee and Clifton Gardens, with an Australian modification of the English model – a kind of sharkproof cage in front. Pictures of the beaches where they were installed show only two or three of them, and a 1907 newspaper report which advocated their re-introduction conceded that “Many years ago a few bathing machines were placed at Coogee, but they were not generally used.”

The Commission on Surf-bathing in 1911 recommended against their re-introduction, stating that they were not suitable for the beaches here, as the wheels sank too easily into the soft sand. Yet their use was apparently widespread enough for them to be blamed for a general lack of swimming proficiency among women, the Illustrated Sydney News complaining in 1876:

Bathing machines where they are used, generally stand in such shallow water that to dive from them (let alone swim) is impossible, as the head would strike against the bottom.  

Concern for modesty and for hiding bathers and swimmers from public view had clearly overridden the primary reason for engagement in such activities - freedom of movement in the water, and the exercise of pleasurable skill. The original English rationale for bathing - as health-giving ritual - again held sway for those who submitted themselves to the constraints of the bathing machines.

The ocean beaches

Throughout much of the earlier part of the nineteenth century the areas around the beaches which lay along the open coast were undeveloped and uninhabited. The governors and settlers in the early days of the colony had soon turned their attention inland, in search of arable land for cultivation. Harbours and bays were of interest

50 The Sydney Morning Herald, 23 January 1907, p.8.
51 Quoted in Pleasures and Pastimes.
Coogee Bay in the 'Seventies.
principally for their usefulness as ports or sites for town settlement. Andrew Short sums up the significance of the beaches along the open coast:

Newcomers found little use for beaches apart from running aground during storms, or loading goods and launching small boats in more sheltered locations. ... The beaches were infertile and worthless, the waves a nuisance and hazard to all coastal sailors, and the dunes behind the beaches a waterless, barren wasteland. 52

Perhaps the earliest specifically local significance of the coastal beach was that of the beach as a sea-fence, one side of the gaol wall imprisoning the convicts within the penal colony. This is dramatised in the example of Eaglehawk Neck, authentically depicted in Marcus Clarke’s For the Term of his Natural Life as a narrow neck of land bordered by shark-infested beaches and constantly patrolled by soldiers with savage dogs to prevent convict escape from the Tasman Peninsula – hardly a positive image.

Many coastal beaches around Sydney were named and surveyed in the early days of settlement by James Meehan, Surveyor, and often the names given to them were Aboriginal, supplied by Aboriginal informants: Bondi (Bundye), Coogee, Maroubra, Cronulla, Curl Curl, and so on. The small settlement of Sydney grew to become a town, and as suburbs were built extending away from the inner city, genteel-sounding English names were bestowed upon them. But these were places that were cultivated and civilized. The ocean beaches were named and then left undeveloped for many years, their Aboriginal names reflecting their status as useless, barbaric fringe. Tegg’s 1842 Almanac wrote of “Great Coogee” [Coogee] that it was a “fine sandy bay...where all the shells and marine productions peculiar to this continent may be found”, proceeding to give the scientific names of sea horses, sponges, corals, and so on, while the note on “a very long sandy bay some 3 miles further south” [Maroubra?] states that “the shore is strewn with large sponges, and other marine productions”. 53 It seemed that the ocean beaches were regarded more as places to visit for the collection of a variety of specimens than for any other value they might have.


53 Tegg’s 1842 Almanac, p.284, p.287 [Mitchell Library].
Baths around the harbour and the rivers remained the only places within public view where swimming was permitted in daylight hours; but by the late nineteenth century the building of more baths was inhibited by sewage pollution which made waters around major centres of population distinctly less enticing:

"every sense is assailed by the sickening and disgusting evidences of our barbarous inattention to sanitary laws..." The sanitation of Sydney is "a standing menace, a defiance of nature, a scandal and reproach to our civilization"..."Melbourne was known as "Smellboom".

The ocean beaches, with their bracing sea breezes and distance from the polluted bay and harbour waters, gained in appeal as places of relief and escape from the congested town and city centres. A general reduction in working hours in the latter part of the century meant more time for relaxation. Horsedrawn buses ran to popular beaches like Bondi, Coogee and Bronte by 1880, soon to be replaced by steam-powered, then electric trams. There was "explosive" suburban development as the middle classes removed themselves from the squalor and crowding of the inner cities. Manly had long been accessible to the city by ferry, and it was a short walk from the ferry wharf to the ocean beach. Thus people started living near and visiting the ocean beaches in larger numbers.

Not yet to swim, however. The written record is mainly silent with respect to swimming at ocean beaches before the late nineteenth century. An exception was Newcastle, where the opportunity for the miners to rinse themselves free of coal dust and to relax by bathing at the beaches on their days off seems to have made beach bathing fairly common. There was an outraged response by the Newcastle Chronicle of 20 January 1866 to the arrest of persons for bathing:

We have seen day after day clergymen, bank managers, merchants, people of all ages and conditions - even astute lawyers - supervisors of police, and police constables bathing before eight o'clock in the morning, in happy ignorance that they were doing...wrong...We have the prescriptive right of at least forty years use of the beach at the back of the gaol as a public bathing

56 Cannon, "Life in the Cities", p.175.
place beyond the hours specified by the Act... thousands have been violating the law the whole of that long period. 57

The paper pointed out on 26 October 1872 that “a large part of the Newcastle male population works in an occupation (mining) which makes a plunge into salt water necessary, and that to deprive them of this would expose them to the loss of health”.

Most evidence suggests, however, that bathing off ocean beaches was not widespread. The ocean beach at Manly was not popular among visitors to the resort, the surf being considered too dangerous for children 58 – and adults were prohibited from freely entering the water in daylight. Arthur Lowe, who was born in 1879, wrote many years later of his experiences as a pioneer surfer at Manly. He claims to have been a keen surfer by the age of 7, and that there were:

No others before myself. It is not hard to explain why. People wouldn’t leave their beds at 6 am to go surfing; they were not allowed by Council By-Law to go later in the day. Bathing at night was eerie. Early in the piece, people were frightened off by sharks... Working hours in those days were long. Transport was a problem. Many had to walk long distances to work and school, and time was therefore a very serious problem. The population was not very big anywhere, least of all around the beaches. There were quite a number of baths about populated areas, where good and comfortable, safe and very economical swims could be had. Nothing was known of such a rare sport as surf shooting at that time for it to be an inducement. 59

Lowe gives some persuasive evidence in support of his judgement that little use was made of the beaches for surfing:

I knew that surfing was not in existence on any of the Sydney beaches at the time because I made it my business to find out. There were various ways. By inquiries, by travelling with my father on Court circuits, by steamboat, north and south along the coast. Also by sailing trips outside Sydney heads... And many cycling excursions were undertaken on other beaches, on both the north and south side of the Harbour.

I saw a lot of the beaches in the area between South Head and Botany Bay from the seaward side. The trips with my father... covered a much greater

58 Vialoux, Manly and Warringah Shire. p.42.
59 Arthur Lowe, Surfing, Surf-Shooting and Surf-Lifesaving Pioneering. Lowe’s rambling reminiscences are a researcher’s nightmare, bearing no publisher, no date, and no page numbers. The cover photograph suggests they were published some time in the late 1950s, when Lowe would have been almost 80. The copy in Manly Municipal Library has page numbers written in; the Mitchell Library copy has not.
area. Gosford, Newcastle, etc., on the north; Wollongong, Bega, etc., on the
south. Invariably the beaches would be void of human life. Very
occasionally, fishing people could be seen. I also made a trip, by a small
steamer, to Newcastle...and carefully scanned the beaches as we slowly
passed them. But very little life could be seen about them. And certainly no
one surfing.

At Bondi, it seems to have been the local Aborigines’ enjoyment of swimming in the
ocean that inspired the Europeans to follow their example:

As far as Bondi the Beautiful is concerned, it was almost unknown to the
white people until about fifty years ago (1874). Yes, it was about fifty years
ago on a bright summer’s day, that a party of we boys stood on Bondi Beach,
watching the blacks, who were camped at Ben Buckler, enjoying the ocean
waves with their wives and children...Said one of the boys, “If the sharks do
not touch them, what about us?” You may say that was the start of surfing at
Bondi. 60

It was as if history had turned full circle and the descendants of the first settlers were
once again able to observe, learn from and copy the Aborigines, as their forebears had
done in the early days of settlement, before the constraints of the culture they had
brought with them took hold. The Bondi lads were unaware that this had happened
before, of course: although George Phillip wrote of the children swimming at
Tamarama beach that they were at times “almost as naked as they came into the
world, more like little aboriginals than white children” 61 there was little or no
appreciation of the ironies of Aboriginal-European contact at this time.

Restrictions on freedom to enjoy the beach

The ban on daylight bathing and swimming

As suburban development moved closer to the beaches, residents had ready access to
them and discovered for themselves the pleasures of bathing in the surf. And as surf-
bathing, as it was called, became more popular, so policing of the ban on daylight
bathing became more assiduous. Bathers seeking to evade the law moved to the more

60 A.R. Stone, “a surfing pioneer at Bondi”, in The Centenary of the Municipality of Waverley, 1874-
secluded and less accessible beaches: from Bondi to Tamarama, or from Manly to Freshwater, South Curl Curl to North Curl Curl and eventually to Dee Why, with the police scaling the rocks and climbing down the gullies in hot pursuit. Male and female daytime swimmers were caught and apprehended, and fines (increased by court costs) meant that the summoned bathers were hard hit.

Lowe suggested that one reason why the police were so zealous was that their superannuation fund was swelled by the number of convictions they achieved. Arresting those whose intention was only to enjoy their swim must have been much easier than trying to apprehend criminals. There was also clearly class and racial antagonism between the bathers (many of whom were members of the professional and business classes) and the police, their Irish brogues often mocked by the surfing pioneers who wrote about these early battles.

Resentment at police harassment increased until the laws were publicly defied, most famously in October 1902 by W.H. Gocher, a Manly newspaper proprietor who broke the law by entering the surf in daylight hours on three consecutive Sundays. Lowe was extremely scornful of Gocher’s efforts: he stated that Gocher was not a surfer at all - he could not even swim, was actually frightened of the water and only went in to his knees. His was a “grotesque and farcical [publicity] stunt”, according to Lowe, and the credit for the ending of the ban on daylight bathing more properly belonged to Bondi surfers, who had engaged in a mass surf-in at about the same time as Gocher. In any case, the magistrate declined to prosecute Gocher and the Inspector-General of Police advised Waverley Council, which had lodged a complaint about bathers at Bondi:

Unless... I receive instructions from the Government to the contrary, I do not see my way to take action beyond instructing the police that decency is to be observed.  

This policy had government backing. Lowe stated that complaints to the Chief Secretary’s Department about police being too busy to protect the suburbs from crime

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65 Phillip, Sixty Years’ Recollections, pp.39-40.
66 Sydney Morning Herald, 15 November 1902, p.7.
because they were chasing surf-bathers may have contributed to the politicians' decision not to enforce the law.

But the ending of the ban on daylight bathing was far from being the end of attempts to constrain activity on the beaches. Efforts to police and control the behaviour of beachgoers persisted for many years.

Bans on Mixed bathing

Mixed bathing was frowned on at first. One correspondent believed that "...mixed bathing lowers the morals of the people and has a tendency to animalise the race".63 Alderman Ogilvie of Manly opined as late as 1917 that "it was disgraceful to allow men and women to lie about the beaches promiscuously," and that "separation of the sexes" should be enforced.64

There were practical reasons why mixed bathing soon became the norm, however. After several drownings it was obvious that 'for safety reasons' it was better to have surfers together in one area of the beach where those in distress could be more easily noticed and rescued. In any case, it was impossible to enforce a rigid separation in the lively surf. Ridiculing attempts towards this end, "HKW" in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 30 October 1908 suggested that fences could be run out half a mile into the Pacific, no peeping allowed, "one man allowed into a sea paddock at a time." Councillor Scudd in Melbourne may have reminded mixed bathers that the practice was against the law in 1911, but no prosecutions ensued.65

Bans on sun-bathing, dressing and undressing on the beach

Sun-bathing was banned. Bathers were supposed to make their way directly to and from the water by the shortest possible route; "loitering" as they did so was

63 "Morality", in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1907, p.11.
65 Wells, p.25.
forbidden. The New South Wales Government had set up a Surf-Bathing committee in 1911 to make recommendations regarding dressing-room accommodation and associated matters. The Committee recommended the construction of enclosures wherein sunbaking could be indulged, but not all beaches were suitable; at Coogee, for example, the beach was below the promenade, people could have looked down into any such enclosure, so it was no use building one. Sunbaking enclosures were approved for Manly, with notices prohibiting sun-basking anywhere else, on pain of a 10 pound fine. For those not taking advantage of such enclosures, an overcoat, mackintosh, or other cover-all robe had to be worn once a bather emerged from the water and mixed with “the general public” on the beach. One correspondent complained about the officiousness with which this was policed:

Bathers may want to come out [of the water] for a minute or so, and then go back in. But during the last few weeks bathers are forced back into the water almost immediately they come out, or else told to go to the dressing sheds.

There was argument back and forth in the newspaper Letters to the Editor columns, but this regulation too soon fell into disuse as surf-bathing, as it was known, became more and more popular.

Dressing and undressing on the beaches was prohibited; this led to prolonged agitation for the provision of adequate accommodation. Individual dressing sheds, or bathing boxes, had been constructed on many beaches but there was a charge for using them. With the numbers now seeking to enjoy the beaches the provision of free dressing sheds, allowing access to the beaches for all irrespective of their income, was advocated, the surf life saving clubs being a powerful lobby group for the improvement of beach amenities. On the recommendation of the 1911 Surf-Bathing Committee, government money in the form of interest-free loans was made available to local councils for the building of toilets and dressing sheds.

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66 The final report of the Committee, containing its recommendations, was presented to the Parliament on 12 February 1912.
67 By-Law issued by the Manly Town Clerk on 22 January 1918, approved by the Minister for Local Government, Mr Fitzgerald, on 14 December 1917 [Wellings collection, Manly Municipal Library].
68 An exception to this rule was made in the case of lifesavers.
Rules about the wearing of “suitable” swimming costumes

Costumes were probably the most vexed issue for the longest time. Earlier, women’s costumes had been dangerously cumbersome, but by 1906 more streamlined neck-to-knee costumes were prescribed, for both women and men. It was specified that costumes should be made with dark material. Letter writers to newspapers generally agreed with strict dress regulations. One woman, calling herself “Australian Girl”, wrote:

No true woman would exhibit herself to all who care to gaze, clad in the thinnest and lightest of gowns...we women as a general rule are not strong enough to swim in the breakers, only going there for the pleasure of having the sweet, clean surf break over us, so our skirts are no great hindrance – we easily discard them when visiting the baths for a swim.

It was a very different matter, however, when three mayors of beachside councils proposed a regulation which was interpreted as making it compulsory for men to wear “skirted” costumes:

They go altogether too far. Why should these three Mayors seek to revolutionize civilization by enforcing a man to wear a woman’s costume simply because he is bathing?...an instance of the official mind gone mad...Bathers are the most manly of men...they would not for a minute tolerate the wearing of women’s clothes. The manly woman may be possible, but save us from the womanly man.

Despite the protests of the hapless Mayors that the proposed modification was not really a skirt, there were mass protests at Bondi and Manly the following Sunday, which took the form at Bondi of Bakhtinian carnivals:

The pageant may not have been as gorgeous as a Venetian carnival, but it was decidedly grotesque...The flimsy print or the substantial piece of jute

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70 Sydney Morning Herald, 21 July 1906, p.10. A sign on the beach at Cottesloe in the early 1900s told bathers they were to wear “dress of dark material - serge, flannel or flannelette extending over the shoulder to the knee [both men and women]”. Wells, p.22.

71 See the Sydney Morning Herald, “Decency and the Surf”, 23 January 1907, p.8; Letter, 24 January 1907, p.10; Letter, 25 January 1907, p.8; Letter, 26 January 1907, p.11; Letter, 28 January 1907, p.5; “G. Norton Russell”, “Australian Girl”, “A Mother of Girls”, Letter, all 14 February 1907, p.8. There were some dissenters, e.g. 2 correspondents on 28 January, but most were in favour of “decency”.

72 “Maroubra Marauder”, Sydney Morning Herald, 15 October 1907, p.5.
served the same purpose. They contributed to the burlesque of the proposal to put men in skirts who patronise the surf. The ‘skirts’ worn by some of the masqueraders were conspicuously ancient, and had evidently been rescued from the domestic scrap heap. Some of them were short, and some were long, and in cases where their length rendered them liable to trail on the ground, the warrior had trainbearers....As the demonstration swept around the beach it was seen that there was a dead bird [a seagull] surmounting the flagpole...

They were a good-natured crowd full of harmless fun, their chief aim being to accentuate the fact that they weren’t going to wear skirts when having their plunge.73

The proposal was quickly dropped, although as late as 1927 Mr C.D. Paterson, President of the Surf Life Saving Association, tried to induce lifesavers to vote to wear a skirted costume at interclub events - a suggestion that, though twice submitted to meetings of the Association, was decisively rejected.74

Most of the regulations restricting free access to the beach soon fell into disuse, due essentially to peaceful mass civil disobedience. Authorities bowed to the force of public opinion with inaction, usually by neither enforcing nor repealing the laws. Sporadic attempts were made to enforce the dress code. In the 1930s a few people were fined or ordered off the beach for inappropriate costumes, and the Minister for Local Government in NSW, the Honourable E.S. Spooner, “updated” the dress regulations by announcing that from 1 October 1935 bathers would have to wear costumes with legs at least three inches long, covering the body in front up to the armpits and on the back up to the waist. There was a public outcry and this regulation, like so many others before it, was honoured in the breach rather than the observance.75

Reasons for restrictions on the freedom of the beach

Why so much resistance, for so long, to untrammelled use of the beaches? The

73 *Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 1907. This prompt, universal and absolute opposition says much about perceptions of and attitudes towards masculinity in Australian cultural history.


75 Wells, p.27; Stell, p.162. As late as the 1960s, women were being ordered off Bondi beach for wearing too-brief bikinis.
simplest answer is the effect of the triumph of bourgeois values of respectability and propriety in Victorian society, allied with the power of the churches, particularly the evangelical churches. From the mid-nineteenth century the influence of Methodism had been increasing, and the temperance and Sabbatarian movements were strong as the proportion of “respectable” members of the colony increased. Dunstan refers to the “extraordinary power of the Nonconformist churches in Victoria and South Australia” in seeking to explain why laws against free use of the beach were harsher and in force until later in these states. Bans on Sunday bathing were an issue in Melbourne for many years, but no such regulation was imposed in New South Wales.

Anglicanism, the church of the most influential and respectable members of society, set its face against the liberalisation of bathing laws. Lowe stated that his parents in the 1880s had refused all attempts to entice them into “the Church organisations which frowned on ocean bathing in daylight hours and which were responsible for getting the various councils to prohibit daylight surf-bathing”. He notes that “the Allday Bathing Ban was led by the Anglicans”, who exerted pressure to maintain the ban on several Manly aldermen who were otherwise sympathetic to all-day bathing.

Following the English example, local government had become the appropriate authority to regulate the beach, and the beachside councils enlisted police assistance to enforce observance of their by-laws. The franchise for local government favoured property holders and it may also have been the case, as in England, that evangelical groups, with their concern for public morality, were disproportionately influential in local government.

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78 For example, the Argus of 21 December 1911 stated that bathing was banned on Sundays, Good Friday, Christmas Day, and any day after 10 am (quoted in Keith Dunstan, *Wowpers: Being an Account of the Prudery exhibited by Certain Outstanding Men and Women in such Matters as Drinking, Smoking, Prostitution, Censorship and Gambling*, Sydney: Cassell Australia Ltd., 1968, p.150.


Local government and the churches acted in concert, in accordance with ideals of decency and proper behaviour. Perhaps they were also driven by a fear of disorder which had its origins in the foundation of the colony. Lurking beneath the threshold of public discourse was a not entirely suppressed awareness of the ignominious beginnings of settlement - the “convict stain”\(^{81}\). Habits of law enforcement prevailed after the relationships between the gaoler and the gaoled which had made them necessary had disappeared. From the perspective of depth psychology, Tacey sees repressive authority in colonial Australia as a defensive reaction common to newly settled societies:

Colonial high culture is far more reactionary, oppressive and dictatorial than the conservative element in the parent culture. The stronger the upsurge of instinct in colonial consciousness, the more severe is the resistance erected to defeat it.\(^{82}\)

Certainly C.D. Paterson, President of the Surf Life Saving Association and the man who tried to introduce skirted costumes into lifesaving competitions, showed a lack of confidence in the ability of local bathers to conform to standards of behaviour prevailing on other (overseas) beaches:

[On the beach at Atlantic City] the bathers are permitted to promenade with a freedom never dreamed of among our surf bathers. From end to end the beach is covered with people in bathing attire, ordinary walking costumes, or by sightseers in deck chairs, and the greatest decorum appears to prevail, but it is a state of affairs which I do not think for a moment should be permitted here.\(^{83}\)

**Reasons for lack of opposition to these restrictions**

Why did people put up with these prohibitions for so long? Nowhere is Stephen Knight’s observation, that “a country [Australia] that prides itself on disregard for repressive law is also a culture that constantly makes rules”,\(^{84}\) more persuasively illustrated than in the case of the regulation of the beaches. The *NSW Government*

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\(^{81}\) Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, p.xi.


\(^{83}\) C.D. Paterson, statement to the Committee on Surf-bathing, 1 September 1911.

\(^{84}\) Stephen Knight, *Freedom was Compulsory*, Port Melbourne: Reed Books Australia, 1994, p.2.
Gazette of 27 March 1912 published Ordinance No.52 relating to amendments of Acts relating to Public Baths and Bathing: the rules cover 3 foolscap pages of small print, and were published in association with the repeal of an Ordinance of the same number, dealing with the same regulations, which had been proclaimed in 1908. Often rules were not repealed, but were simply not enforced.

For many years, bathers put up with the regulations when and where they could not successfully evade them. Perhaps there was a social consensus in favour of them, and many who might otherwise have enjoyed a swim had internalised the norms and conventions which underlay the various bathing bans. Even the leader writer in the Newcastle Chronicle, who so often praised the cleansing and health-giving aspects of ocean bathing, was submissive to the better judgement of the law:

the law must be obeyed till it’s amended. Good things may be brought at too dear a price. If the feelings of decency and modesty be outraged, or become so blunted as to be made indifferent to indelicate exhibitions, the practice that leads to it cannot be tolerated.

Year after year, this editorial writer denounced the over-zealous prosecution of bathers and advocated the building of baths as a solution to the problem, but never did he suggest that a campaign should be mounted to change the law.

Knight identifies what he considers to be a crucial element in Australia’s postcolonial society:

the self-restraint of the underclass in its effort to be judged respectable by the rulers. Much of the insistent love of legality by the apparently free, ordinary, neo-colonised Australian is a nervous defence against the risk of being unruly.

He traces this back to the early, basic conflict between the “landtakers” and a coalition of colonized, disaffected groups — what could loosely be defined as antipathy between “sterling” and “currency”. Robert Hughes, in attempting to distinguish any lasting effects of convictry, discerned in Tasmania (where the effects of transportation were

\[\text{85} \text{ NSW Government Gazette no. 40, 27 March 1912, pp.1933-1936.}\]
\[\text{86} \text{ Newcastle Chronicle, 2 October 1869, p.3: 26 October 1872, p.3.}\]
\[\text{87} \text{ Knight, Freedom was Compulsory, p.8.}\]
most concentrated) “a malleable and passive working class, paternalistic institutions, a
tame press and colonized Anglophile values”.\textsuperscript{88} Whether or not one accepts these
sweeping cultural and political assessments as explanatory, there is no evidence of
concerted opposition to the bathing bans until shortly before they collapsed.

The achievement of free access to the beach

Why did beachgoing eventually become accepted? A consensus in favour of existing
regulations was lost as fewer working hours meant more opportunity for enjoyment
and “respectable” members of society who had moved in the late nineteenth century
to suburbs near the beaches began to enjoy the pleasures of surf-bathing. The leaders
in movements against the bans were professionals: Gocher was an Englishman and a
newspaper proprietor. Lowe’s father was a successful lawyer, the family had several
servants in their household, and Tommy Tanna, a native of Vanuatu (then the New
Hebrides) who was credited with teaching Manly bathers the art of bodysurfing, was a
gardener in the home of one of Lowe’s neighbours. A Bondi clergyman and doctor,
the Reverend Robert McKeown, accompanied by Frank McElhone, a lawyer and the
son of a former Lord Mayor of Sydney, were prosecuted for bathing at Bondi a few
weeks after Gocher’s famous swim.\textsuperscript{89} George Philip, who in \textit{60 Years’ Recollections
of Swimming and Surfing in the Eastern Suburbs} took the credit for breaking down
the law against daylight bathing at Tamarama, was an Inspector of Schools and a
successful writer and publisher of school textbooks. He described with relish his fight
with Waverley police over three weekends. On the first Sunday a policemen appeared
and read out the law to the lawbreakers on Tamarama beach.

After it was all over he pocketed his blue book and started to return the way
he came... Next Sunday another policeman appeared – a more popular one
who said that that particular blue book was out of date, the other policeman
was a silly fool who didn’t know what he was talking about. Next Sunday
the Superintendent of Police came. The Writer gave him his card, and asked
him what he was going to do about it.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{88} Hughes, \textit{The Fatal Shore}, p.594.
\textsuperscript{89} The outcome is not known, as records of the charge and any subsequent proceedings have been
destroyed.
\textsuperscript{90} Philip, \textit{Sixty Years’ Recollections}, pp.40-41.
The Writer gave him his card: the surfers were clearly persons of substance in the community, not mere layabouts. Victory was won, and surfing became legal.

Perhaps ordinary people had been indulging in unobserved, undocumented, illicit enjoyment of the surf long before this. However, much as the idea of a proletarian uprising might appeal to those who believe in the power of the people, it was not the masses but men of status and authority who achieved the freedom of the surf.

Hegemonic support for surf-bathing was enlisted by appeals based on two persuasive arguments and one important development. The first and probably more influential argument related to the health-giving properties of beachgoing - an argument which had strong racial overtones. The second was the citing of evidence that money was to be made out of the popularity of the beaches. And the important development, one which greatly increased surfing’s social acceptability and allayed the anxieties of those who feared that disorder might result from unrestricted freedom, was the rise of the surf lifesaving movement.

The health of the race

Not only was surf-bathing promoted for its health-giving properties (perhaps building on old beliefs about the therapeutic value of seawater) but it was seen as superior to any other type of bathing:

There is no doubt about the fact that surf-bathing is wonderfully healthy. In the first place, it is quite different to bathing in ordinary calm water. One is always moving about in the surf, diving, swimming and dashing through the waves, and consequently plenty of physical exercise is taken. Then the action of the surf breaking against the body keeps it in a healthy glow. Then again the surf contains phosphorus and other chemical qualities that serve to strengthen and invigorate the system. The sun also has a very beneficial effect on the body…The strong salt seabreeze, too, helps blow away the cobwebs…corpulent people get rid of their loose unnecessary flesh by regular surf bathing, while thin people put on flesh…the muscles are hardened, and the blood corpuscles of the skin improved…Surf-bathing is
helping to build up a race of fine young hardy Australians, and everything should be done to encourage it.  

The last sentence needs to be understood in the context of the times. The late nineteenth century had seen the development of theories of race which helped to underpin the foundations for modern nation states in Europe. These nations consciously traced their roots to a great and glorious past based on racial groupings. Australia had attained nationhood with the achievement of Federation in 1901 but had anything but a “great and glorious past” with which to nourish the idea of an Australian race. For some, there was strong adherence to the belief that Australia would perpetuate and enhance the greatness of the British race; but a forward-looking vision, of a future race of Australians who would surpass the excellence of their European forebears, was a heady one in those optimistic early days of Federation. Integral to this idea of race was a conviction of the need for racial purity, that the race should be a white race: one of the first acts of the new Federal Parliament was the adoption of the White Australia policy.

Ideas of racial destiny sat comfortably with a belief in social Darwinism. If the triumph of “the race” depended on “the survival of the fittest”, then it followed that the race needed to be fit, to maintain its supremacy over other lesser but potentially aggressive races. There was also a new consciousness that the health of the general population could be greatly improved by public health measures. The introduction of sewerage, improvements in garbage disposal and the appointment of health and safety inspectors to monitor public hygiene had resulted in a marked decrease in infant and child mortality in the 1880s. Fatalistic acceptance of high mortality rates gave way to an expectation that good health could be achieved and sustained by encouraging the population to engage in health-giving practices and pastimes – like surf-bathing.

Outbreaks of plague in various parts of Sydney in 1900 could only have reinforced the common belief that cities were unhealthy places. Most people lived in the cities,
unable to enjoy the health benefits ascribed to life in the country. The fortuitous proximity of surfing beaches to the cities was therefore all the more welcome:

The pastime [surfing] ...is helping to build up a fine vigorous race from amongst the young people who live in the cities bordering on our shores.93

Charles Meere’s class 1940 painting Australian Beach Pattern (page 74a) manifests this exaltation of the physical. The people on the beach, heroic in form and stature, loom up from the picture as in a monumental grouping, frozen in mid-movement. Where other nations erect monuments to honour soldiers, revolutionaries or workers, this painting is an Australian equivalent, celebrating the people on the beach: Everyman, Woman and Child as national/racial Ideal.

The final seal of approval was the reaction of an “overseas expert” to the experience of surfing:

William Henry, founder of the Royal Life Saving Society in England, paid a visit to Manly: “It is magnificent. There is some wonderful chemical influence in your surf that makes it a tonic bath, and the invigorating effect on the body is marvellous. I have often heard of it, but never expected anything so delightful”.94

In the honeymoon stage of Australians’ love affair with the beach in the 1920s, articles were written with such titles as “The Race on the Sands: Showing what Surf and Sun are doing for the Inhabitants of the Australian Coastline”95 and “The Shores Set Free: What Surfing is doing towards the Making of a New Race along the Pacific Coast of Australia”.96 The surf-bathers were described as “young Greek gods”, and the healthful physical effects of surfing eulogised.

The perceived health-giving properties of the surf are the key to the lack of opposition to allowing women the same opportunities to enter the surf as men: “The women, the mothers of our race, are inclined to stay indoors, and take less exercise than the

94 Reported in the Sydney Morning Herald, 23 October 1910, p.7.
95 Jean Curlwiss. The Home, March 1929, pp.25-32, 72.
Australian Beach Pattern, a painting by Charles Meere, (see page 74)
men... The surf is Nature's remedy for the slackened constitution..." The health advantages of the surf for women were so great that they outweighed disapproval of mixed bathing and enabled the respectable to argue that fears about its dangers were unfounded:

The association of the sexes so far from suggesting impropriety has the very opposite effect. Amidst the tumult of the waters can be heard shrieks of feminine laughter, showing that the wives, daughters, sisters, cousins, and aunts are having a right good time. The introduction of mixed or Continental bathing is one of the best things that has happened for the ladies and children of Sydney. Many an erstwhile weary woman and pallid girl is today rejoicing in life and energy....

Just as the dangers of mixed bathing were seen to be groundless, so the nuisance posed by what was darkly referred to as "the rough element" faded in the minds of the proponents of surf-bathing. The situation here seems to have paralleled that in England:

By the end of the nineteenth century in some of the well-established popular resorts, a common recreational culture was developing at the seaside for the pleasure-loving of all classes. Mainstream middle-class attitudes were relaxing, and working-class behaviour was widely perceived to be improving.

Thus, while the leader writer of the Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate (formerly the Chronicle) on 18 April 1884 had condemned "Filthy larrikins" in extravagant terms - "the all-pervading larrikin has changed a resort fit for the gods into a mephitic horror" - as surfing became popular the tune changed:

On Eight-Hour Day 20,000 people visited the village [Manly] and their behaviour was exemplary... I will admit that some years back an undesirable class of visitor was in evidence... but times have changed for the better.

One of the chief arguments against surf bathing in NSW was that it would bring an undesirable class of people to the beach... How wrong that argument was has since been amply verified. There are no more orderly or respectable parts of the Commonwealth than our beaches...

97 Sydney Morning Herald, 12 October 1910, p.7. (emphasis added)
98 Newsletter, 18 March 1905. in Wellings Cuttings (Manly Library), Book no. 1, pp.2-3.
100 Daily Telegraph, 27 October 1905, p.6.
101 Hill, p.415.
Even where a correspondent, as if by force of habit, railed against "a riotous condition of affairs" at Coogee, a sober look at the facts revealed that "The misconduct complained of is chiefly connected with the practice of lying about the beach" — surely a particularly passive and innocuous form of "riotous" behaviour. Sometimes, in fact, the behaviour of the lower orders was seen to be more decorous than that of their betters:

It is noteworthy that the rougher element always to be met with on the surf-bathing beaches is particularly careful in this respect [immodest behaviour in the dressing sheds], more so, in fact, than the average public schoolboy who has been brought up in disdain of prudery.

Walton wrote that "The seaside expressed class and cultural differences; the insoluble problem is to show how it influenced them." The influence of beachgoing in Australia was probably to blur consciousness of class and cultural differences, partly because of the idea of racial health and fitness which was associated with the beach. If race was an idea which excluded people from exotic places and with dark skins, it was inclusive of members of all classes within the nation as long as they were white. Where the concept of race was salient, consciousness of class difference became less marked.

The beach and opportunities for profit

To the propertied classes, rises and falls in property values are of the highest importance. Before surf-bathing became popular, it was considered that the presence of people disporting themselves in the surf detracted from the amenity of the beach suburbs. A Randwick alderman complained that "The value of property is reduced, and people are attracted to Coogee who Coogee could afford to do without."

102 "Disgraceful Scenes on the Beach". *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 January 1908, p.9.
This argument was turned on its head as proximity to beaches was promoted as a selling point in land and house sales:

Wherever there is a beach land has jumped from a few shillings to as many pounds per foot. Whether it is at Maroubra, where 5 years ago land was unsaleable, or at Freshwater, Curl Curl or Narrabeen, where water or beach frontages are almost unobtainable...prices have gone up and up.\(^{107}\)

At a meeting of representatives of surf clubs, it was said that property had tripled in value in five years, the population had increased 50%, and house rents had doubled, as had rates.\(^{108}\) Alderman Quirk of Manly rejected these claims as exaggerated\(^{109}\), but the association of the beaches with opportunities for profit in the residential market facilitated acceptance of the activities which took place there, at the same time increasing pressures for “improvement” of the beaches themselves.

As usual, examples of how things were done overseas were invoked as municipal councils (or, should their enterprise be lacking, would-be entrepreneurs) were exhorted to make their fortunes by developing the resort potential of the beaches:

In places like Brighton, Bexhill, Eastbourne, Blackpool, Hastings, Margate [and in Europe] ... the municipal authorities...make great profits, which are used to increase public conveniences and enjoyments....There should be bands and music, organised amusement, rational recreation, and open-air dining to draw the people to our beauty spots. Manly beach and Bondi have the chance of being to Sydney what Coney Island is to New York, and Blackpool to the Midlands.\(^{110}\)

When both local government and commerce showed no eagerness to rise to the challenge, the tone became reproachful:

Anyone who has seen popular watering resorts in Europe and America will remember them as filled with evidence of pride, and care... The marine front, the gardens and lawns, the seawall, the terraces, the esplanade – in a thousand seaside resorts these are details of organisation which have built places not remarkably dowered with natural beauty to a splendid height of


\(^{108}\) *Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 1907, p.11.

\(^{109}\) *Daily Telegraph*, 23 October 1907, p.9.

\(^{110}\) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 January 1907, p.5.
picturesqueness... The contrast between any of these places and our own Manly, or Coogee, or Bondi, is painful to think of. The contrast between any of these places and our own Manly, or Coogee, or Bondi, is painful to think of.

Time would tell whether dreams of Antipodean Coney Islands and Blackpools were to be realised. Meanwhile, their promotion served to secure acceptance of beachgoing by those who were not themselves attracted by the physical delights of the beaches.

The rise of the surf lifesaving clubs

The enormous increase in the popularity of surf-bathing in the first half of the twentieth century would almost certainly not have been realised without the formation of the surf life saving clubs. The clubs were established in response to clear and urgent need. The first recorded drowning of a bather in the surf had been at Bondi in 1818; and as the numbers flocking to the beach increased, so did the number of those who got into difficulties and drowned. Histories of individual clubs show a common pattern: a drowning tragedy followed by a public meeting and the establishment of the Club. Sometimes there was already a kind of informal club in existence, where a group of regular surfers organised themselves to watch out for inexperienced swimmers getting into difficulties. Bondi and Bronte are contenders for the credit of being first, in 1907; what is certain is that similar initiatives were taken on many other beaches within a very short space of time, not only in New South Wales but on Queensland and Western Australian beaches as well. Clubs all over Australia affiliated to become members of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia, adopting similar rules, procedures, and techniques of rescue and resuscitation.

The status of the clubs was uncertain during a period when questions of management and control were sorted out with local government. Councils in beachside suburbs were often ambivalent towards the growing popularity of surf-bathing, and a desire to “pass the buck” to the State Government for the provision of facilities needed on the beaches conflicted with concern that the taking on of such responsibilities by the Government would undermine Council control. Tension also developed as some

111 “Beach Mismanagement”. Sydney Morning Herald, 2 December 1911, p.16.
112 Sydney Gazette, 18 July 1818.
Councils, Manly for example, perceived the lifesaving clubs as rivals in a struggle for control over the beaches. There was little initial financial support or assistance with accommodation for the fledgling clubs, and they kept going with donations and their own funds (as collections taken up on Manly ferries had funded a lifeboat operated by the Sly brothers, fishermen from Fairy Bower who often rescued those in difficulties before the surf clubs began operating).

These early tensions soon disappeared, however, as the public embraced the idea, indeed the ideal, of the lifesaving movement, and its indispensable role in improving the safety of the beaches was recognised. The 1911-12 Government Committee on Surf-Bathing, while affirming that all powers relating to care, control and management of beaches were vested in local Councils, also advanced thousands of pounds in the form of loans to the Councils, payable within ten years without interest, for the erection of clubrooms for the surf life saving clubs.

The lifesavers, with their patrols, their equipment, and their distinctive yellow and red flags and caps, soon became a symbol of safety on the beaches. It was the proud record of the clubs that no lives were lost while a lifesaving patrol was on duty until Black Sunday in February 1938. During the middle decades of the century, a report of the numbers of summer weekend rescues at the popular beaches was a regular feature of Monday's newspapers. The voluntary nature of the movement was especially admired, the lack of gratitude of so many of those rescued, condemned. The lifesaver became an urban hero, praised in extravagant terms:

The lifesavers represent the very highest class [among the social distinctions of the beach]. They are the Samurais [sic], the oligarchs, the elite.

Jaggard argues that there was an implicit social contract between councils and lifesaving clubs, whereby the larrikinism of many lifesavers was rarely publicised as an image of a disciplined and reliable community service was highlighted. The lifesaving movement became a universally approved social institution, the only

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114 This event is described in Chapter Six.
element of order amidst the anarchy of the beach. The aspiring lifesaver had to undergo a series of difficult tests to gain his bronze medallion, without which he could not become a club member. Training was rigorous, the skills of rescue and resuscitation constantly practised, and the self-discipline required of lifesavers was constantly stressed. Frequent surf carnivals pitted club against club: “The association encouraged this competitive involvement... club members would train relentlessly and compete against themselves”.117

Qualities valorised in the wider society – of hard work, self-discipline, order, competition, and public service – were now embodied in the lifesavers, and the beach thereby gained legitimacy. Beachgoers were reassured by the sight of these superbly fit young athletes and their proven record of protecting the surf-bathing public. An ever-visible Presence, they seemed to guarantee safety not only against the hazards of the surf, but the dreaded menace of sharks. The abundance of sharks in the waters around Sydney had been noted when the first settlement was founded, and fear of sharks was undoubtedly a significant disincentive to swimming in unfenced waters. One of the tasks of lifesavers was to maintain a watch for sharks, sometimes atop a lookout tower which was erected on the beach for that purpose. The sighting of a shark resulted in the ringing of a bell or the wailing of a siren, a signal recognised by those in the water and followed by a rapid return to the shore. Shark attacks were not eliminated by this surveillance,118 but knowing that the trusted lifesavers were watching out for them was psychologically comforting, a reassuring component of the “mantle of safety” which they seemed to cast over the beach.

E.A. Holloway’s painting “Resuscitation”, reproduced on page 80a, illustrates the reverent admiration felt for the lifesavers’ skills and their readiness to risk their lives for others. The colours in the painting are those commonly used in religious pictures favoured by the pious during that period. The figure of Christ, conventionally

118 The Australian Shark Attack File, held at Sydney’s Taronga Park Zoo Aquarium, lists 491 recorded shark attacks in Australia over 200 years, of which 182 were fatal. The meshing of popular Sydney beaches (meshing is also practised in Queensland and was proposed for South Australia) has done more than any other measure to reduce the number of shark attacks. (Alan Sharpe, Shark Down Under: Shark Attacks in Australian Waters, Brookvale, Sydney: The Book Company International Pty Ltd., 1993.)
"Resuscitation", a painting by E.A. Holloway (see page 80)
represented with halo and flowing white robe, stretches out His arms in benediction over the crowd itself, but especially over the lifesavers who so selflessly carry on His work of salvation on earth.

The task of policing the beach remained firmly in the hands of the Council, usually delegated to a Beach Inspector\textsuperscript{119} employed by the Council, with the assistance of the police to be invoked as a last resort. Lifesavers never had, and were never perceived to have, a policing function. But in supervising the safety of those who packed the beaches, and in rescuing the incompetent, the foolish or the unlucky, they constituted a benevolent, trusted form of Authority which held at bay the beach’s potential for disorder and danger.

The Indigenising of the Beach

The red and yellow bathing caps of the lifesavers and the red and yellow flags indicating the areas which were patrolled and where it was therefore safe to bathe, were merely the most visually arresting signs that the beach was acquiring distinctively local, or indigenous, features. As the beach gained in popularity, so a characteristically Australian way-of-being-at-the-beach developed.

Knowledge of, and adaptation to local conditions

At the English seaside and on the Continent, the models from which Australians’ idea of the beach had been derived, bathing was generally abandoned when the seas became rough. On Australia’s ocean beaches, a lively surf was the normal state of affairs. Hence, when it came to the achievement of maximum pleasure and minimum danger at the beach, the imported model provided no inspiration nor guidance.

With respect to beach safety, many were the helpful suggestions regarding types of lifesaving equipment by correspondents to the newspapers. Work on designing a reel

\textsuperscript{119} Now sometimes called a lifeguard.
for lifelines began in 1903 and soon the reel, lifeline and belt method of rescue was perfected and adopted by all the Clubs, resulting in the saving of thousands of lives. Rescue and resuscitation procedures, and flags for the demarcation of safe areas for bathing, were similarly devised and uniformly adopted. Surfboats, which remain the highlight of surf carnivals but have been replaced for practical purposes by speedy inflatable rubber boats with outboard motors, were based on the design of the Sly brothers’ Manly lifeboat, but were adapted for better handling and steering in the surf.

A major cause of difficulty and drowning were the parts of the surf - variously called the undertow, the drawback, the backwash, and now, rip - where swimmers and bathers were most in danger of being swept out to sea. In newspapers, magazine articles, and no doubt from one person to another, instructions were given on how to avoid being caught in a rip, and how to escape from a rip if caught, as regular surfers shared the fruits of their experience with others.

A similar passing on of knowledge occurred in the case of body-surfing, or surf-shooting, as it was first called. While Tommy Tanna is usually credited with having brought the skill to Australian surfers, Lowe claimed that he had worked out how to shoot a wave before Tanna showed him how to do it better; and it is plausible that a strong, well-coordinated swimmer, at ease in the surf, could discover for him- or herself how to use the momentum of the wave to assist propulsion of the body towards the shore.

Thus the novel conditions encountered on Australian beaches precluded reliance on an imported model. Local innovations and solutions became a source of nationalistic pride as, for example, belt-and-reel rescue equipment and methods were copied and used on overseas beaches, and a style of swimming became known internationally as the Australian crawl. The new nationalistic spirit was sometimes manifested as pride in the local rather than the imported. The Sydney Morning Herald on 28 September 1909 expressed its satisfaction that:

Luckily for Australia, it [Manly] has never become infected with the snobbishness that would have abolished an interesting old name and set up a New Margate, or East North Sydney, or Sandville-on-Sea instead. Manly's Manly still (p. 7).
There is a doubly delicious irony here. The heading of the article in which these words appeared was “The Boulogne of Australia”; and the writer was evidently ignorant of the fact that in 1877 Manly was proclaimed a municipality after having unsuccessfully petitioned in 1876 to become a municipality called Brighton. If “Manly’s Manly still”, it was a close thing.

*Freedom of access to and occupation of the beaches*

Lowe recalled an occasion when his father stood with him looking out over Manly beach. Lowe’s father, a lawyer, waving his hand at the sand and the promenade, told his son:

> It belongs to the people, for a hundred feet above the highwater mark... It belongs to the people, all of the people.

Like most statements about land ownership, the situation is more complicated than Lowe senior asserted.\(^1\) It is true that under English common law the Crown reserved, to a depth of 100 feet (30 metres) adjoining the highwater mark, water frontage on the sea coast. The majority of beaches in all states are Crown land.\(^2\)

However, there is no inalienable right to beach access and occupation in Australian law. In the nineteenth century, land grants were made which encompassed beaches. If there was no land access to a beach entirely surrounded by private property, it was to all intents and purposes alienated from the public. This was the situation at Dee Why, for example: the Salvation Army owned all the land adjoining the beach, a wire

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\(^1\) *The Settlers’ Synopsis of the Land Laws of New South Wales, Being a Practical Report of the Many Crown Lands Acts now in Force and the Regulations Thereunder, with copies, notes, and references to the Leading Decisions in Land Cases by the Land Appeal Court, Supreme Court, High Court and Privy Council, including Chapters on the Western Lands Act, Advances to Settlers, Roads, and other cognate Acts*, compiled by W.G. Acocks. 2nd and revised edition, Sydney: Law Book of Australasia Ltd., 1906, issued at the time beaches were first becoming popular, indicates that the 1884 Crown Lands Act, which had repealed and superseded Acts of 1861, 1875 and 1880, already had 38 extending, amending and repealing Acts.\(^2\) Communications received from relevant State authorities relating to the ownership of beaches are contained in Appendix B.
netting barrier extended all the way along it, and any trespassers were threatened with prosecution by the Army.¹²²

Nevertheless, there seems to have been a widely held conviction that the public should have free access to the beaches, as a cultural right transcending mere law. This idea of freedom of access was expressed in two ways: first, that the beaches should be available to all irrespective of income; and secondly, that they should not be alienated for private use and profit.

This first meaning is clearly expressed in discussion of proposals to charge for access to dressing sheds:

The people who cannot afford to pay the few pence that would be demanded are precisely those whose interests have to be conserved. The beach offers them at present a healthy outing at the cost of a tram fare and no scheme should be entered upon which does not regard the preservation of that opportunity as its first duty. The leading principle should be that the ocean is free to all.¹²³

With respect to the second meaning of “freedom of access”, this idea might have been fostered by an early victory over commercial interests. In 1906 the pleasure grounds at Wonderland City at Bondi were enclosed by an eight foot high fence with a strong concrete foundation, preventing free entry to Wonderland City but also blocking off access to the beach. To the annoyance of managers of the pleasure park, children and youths kept cutting the barbed wire which was intended to secure the boundary. A rumour spread that Wonderland City management was planning to gain a lease for an indefinite period which would exclude the public from the beach. This galvanised Philip, the conqueror of the police on Tamarama Beach, and his colleagues to mount a campaign to thwart any such decision. Adopting the slogan that there was a plot to “take away beaches and parks from the people”, Philip used his familiarity with the social and political system to good effect. He visited the houses of Members of Parliament, arranged a deputation to the Minister for Lands, and pressed the case against a lease with such success that it was never thereafter proposed. Philip himself

believed that his campaign had been crucial: "I am convinced had we not so strenuously taken up the fight the lease would have been given."¹²⁴

There is other evidence of more general acceptance of the principle that private interests should not be allowed to alienate beaches:

J.G. Mosley has pointed out that from the 1860s Australian governments made a practice of reserving the coastal foreshore and the banks of lakes and streams for public use, showing foresight in a generation not much given to the use of the beach for pleasure.¹²⁵

When the beaches became popular and access had been difficult or impossible because private land ownership had previously been granted, Government and Councils resumed land to create beachfront reserves:

During the past five years ratepayers of Warringah have paid 68,956 pounds for purchase of foreshores and reserves... Probably no other council in New South Wales could show such a fine record, the Shire President said. But they couldn't be expected to go on burdening the ratepayers in that way indefinitely. Beaches were used by people who came in their thousands from all parts, and acquisition of places of access, in his opinion, should be a national work.¹²⁶

The point at issue here was where the money for resumption should come from — not the desirability of resumption in itself.

And this belief has remained strong. While in other countries an area around a beach and including the beach may be ceded to private ownership, attempts to appropriate the beach in any way are met with fierce resistance here, as shown by examples 50 years apart in time:

The proposed shutting of the public off the foreshore of Manly beach, and handing them over to showmen, is exactly what the Minister for Lands has already declined to permit other gonce-grubbing councils to do... What is now wanted is that the Minister for Lands promptly points out to the Manly

¹²⁴ Philip, *Sixty Years' Recollections*, pp.49-55. Philip published correspondence relating to this campaign, illustrating his familiarity with political tactics and processes.


¹²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1929, p.12.
mugwumps that the Manly parks and beach foreshores are for the public, and not for individual or collective side showmen, or speculative syndicates.\textsuperscript{127}

Mosman Council has decided to reject a controversial proposal to allow corporate sponsorship at Balmoral Beach because the notion of stamping a corporate logo on the harbour beach has been seen as distasteful.

The Town Clerk...and the Mayor...had recently agreed to let a sponsorship company, Lightning Rod, secure a company to “adopt” Balmoral beach in return for money for capital works.

However, when the secret deal was revealed in the \textit{Herald} last week, the aldermen were horrified and voted unanimously to reject the idea.\textsuperscript{128}

\textit{The unadorned beach}

The public could not have it both ways. Either the beaches could be at least partly given over to commercial interests, or they would remain undeveloped. It was as much as councils could afford to provide basic dressing sheds and toilets and the essential surf club houses with Government loan assistance. From one point of view, this was all that was needed:

The average surf-bather has no desire to be palatially housed and so long as he can hang his oldest clothes and a towel upon a peg (with some reasonable prospect of finding them there when he comes back) he is perfectly well satisfied.\textsuperscript{129}

Others retained dreams of the beaches becoming “what Coney Island is to New York, and Blackpool to the Midlands”, foreseeing “the inevitable time to come when smart business enterprises will set about it.”\textsuperscript{130} But their visions were based on an overestimate of the real profit-making potential of the beaches. The few amusement parks which were built were never as popular as similar ventures in the United States, and soon struggled to attract patronage. Wonderland City closed in 1911, and by

\textsuperscript{127} Truth, Editorial, 30 March 1913.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 19 May 1993. Even so, the price of keeping commerce from putting its mark on the beach is eternal vigilance: and there are not a few examples of some waterfront residents in wealthy suburbs exercising a kind of informal ownership of beachfronts bordering their properties. There are always exceptions to the rule where money is concerned.
\textsuperscript{130} “Beach Mismanagement”. \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 2 December 1911, p.16.
1914 St Kilda and White City were struggling to pay their way. Even in England, with its much more densely packed seaside resorts, only the most popular entertainment parks and palaces made large profits. While many entrepreneurs found the seaside an attractive investment prospect, in northern England particularly “The few successful dividend-earners were far outweighed by the failures and abortive schemes”.

If English seaside resorts, patronised by a much larger population, found it hard to sustain profitable entertainment venues, then it was almost inevitable that their Australian imitations would fail. The various Aquaria, Wonderland City, attractions built with so much hope and fanfare, decayed and were demolished. Most of the piers built for promenading disappeared, either swept away in storms or demolished because of the high costs of maintenance. As the beaches lost most of their built accoutrements and became barer, they kept increasing in popularity. It seemed that the lure of the beach was sufficient unto itself.

The “suburbancy” of popular beaches and its consequences

It was significant in the development of the meaning of the Australian beach that the primal, most popular beaches fringed the suburbs, as noted by the travel writer Jan Morris:

...there is no other great city with quite such a gift: the beaches of Los Angeles or San Francisco have none of the domestic appeal of these Sydney ocean fronts, which are like sand-and-surf extensions of the family suburbs behind them.

Years before, Jean Curlewis had written in celebration of this very ordinariness, the casual interweaving of suburban life with the enjoyment of the beach:

Our long coast scalloped as neatly as a beach towel. Behind each beach, a village...In the steep gardens husbands and wives garden domestically in

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131 Waterhouse, Private Pleasures, p.187.
their bathing suits. Butcher boys dash on their rounds with towels round their necks...Business men come home from the office and go for a dip before dinner as inevitably as men in other cities wash their hands.\textsuperscript{134}

For many of those who lived and worked near the beaches, or who could reach them easily by public transport, the beach was a place to be unselfconsciously enjoyed, not a setting for courting the public gaze through self-presentation or display of the body beautiful. There were plenty of those (beautiful bodies), of course. Ben Travers, the English playwright, wrote of a visit to Bondi in the 1920s:

Nowhere in the world had I ever seen a lovelier setting for the recreation ground of thousands of magnificently proportioned young males with bronzed torsos, escorting an equal number of young females, who revealed, so far as the regulations allowed, that their forms were as attractive as their faces...the whole experience was Paradisiac.\textsuperscript{135}

Appreciation of the beautiful bodies to be seen on the beaches has never been lacking; but observers have also noted that being a superb physical specimen is not a prerequisite for entry to the beach:

Contrary to the belief general among those who don't know, the feminine surf-bather is not often a roguish damsel of the type pictured on illustrated post-cards but a sedate, and frequently middle-aged, married woman, who is usually accompanied by her offspring...she seeks the water for its own sake and cares nothing for her appearance...\textsuperscript{136}

Here on the beach an elderly lady happily parks her spectacles with her towel and wades happily into the fray.\textsuperscript{137}

There are many men - and, curiously enough, mostly well over middle age - and women, too, who never miss their morning dip in the long Pacific swell.\textsuperscript{138}

The beaches became favourite holiday places for those who did not live close to them. Fine holiday beach houses were built by the well-off, fibro or wooden beach shacks by the less wealthy; others patronised guest houses or private hotels; unions and

\textsuperscript{134}Jean Curlewis, “The Race on the Sands”, p.25.
friendly societies built clusters of beachside holiday cabins for their members; and families put up their tents or swarmed into caravan parks to spend the long summer holidays by the beach. But while there were always tourists and holidaymakers among the locals and those who arrived from other suburbs by tram, bus or ferry (and later, cars), the suburbanity of the popular beach added to its casual atmosphere and inclusiveness, and influenced attitudes to beachgoing generally. Many of the beaches were still referred to as “resorts” until well into the century; however, it was a description that faded as for many people beachgoing was an experience not necessarily synonymous with holidays. “Resort” became a label applied to exotic places whose special purpose was to cater for the needs and dreams of those seeking pleasure and escape—ski resorts, Barrier Reef resorts, overseas holiday destinations—not your local beach.

The label of “the seaside” when applied to Australian beaches was even less appropriate. In England a “majestic seaside architecture” had blossomed during the nineteenth century. Terraces were landscaped and paved or planted with gardens. Promenades esplanades, and parades, lined by hotels and lodging-houses fascinated travellers, one of whom noted in 1824 that “a continuous train of carriages and men and women on foot or on horseback [moved back and forth] a hundred times on the same site;” seaside architecture was characterised by its “cumbersome magnificence.” This use and arrangement of space overwhelmed the beach: the beach had become the seaside. In Australia, the beach itself remained the focus of attention, assisted by its lack of adornment. The occasional grand hotel and beach pavilion failed to dominate the tiled roofs, houses and flats of the suburbia bordering the beaches. The names given to streets along the beach of esplanade, parade and terrace only serve as a pale reminder of what might have, but probably never could have, been.

Conclusion

The appearance of the crowds on the beaches altered during the remainder of the twentieth century as fashions came and went: the hiring of deckchairs and rubber floats; a passion for acquiring a suntan replaced for many by concern about the damage caused by ultraviolet radiation with the consequent wearing of sun-protective clothing and creams; the crumbling of resistance to the wearing of increasingly briefer costumes, the tolerance of women “going topless” and the designation of some beaches as nude beaches. With rising affluence after World War II and the consequent increase in car ownership, patterns of beach use changed as people were no longer restricted to beaches easily accessible by public transport. The sixties and seventies saw the increasing popularity of surfboard riding as new technology made lighter boards easier to ride and to carry to the beaches; and along with the popularity of “surfing” now re-defined as surfboard riding, there came the importation of the surfing sub-culture made popular in California. As increasing numbers have settled near the beaches, concern over environmental damage has led to the beach being subsumed, in ecological and political contexts, under the concept of “the coast”; thus local councils wrestle with “coastal management policies”, dealing with would-be developers and conservationists who pursue their conflicting agendas. Outrage over beach pollution was first expressed when a sewer outfall was built at Bondi in the 1880s, and has constantly provoked condemnation and protest; there is also agitation against building too close to beaches, against factors contributing to beach erosion, and against any new proposal to dump sewage into the ocean. Now there is argument among surfers (boardriders) between those who fight to preserve the natural features of the beaches and those who are tempted to advocate the “improvement” of beaches for surfing through the building of artificial reefs. The beach, symbol of nature, is always and inevitably affected by cultural change.

From the viewpoint of this study, however, the most significant development in the history of the beach – the transformation from an imported idea of the seaside to an Australianized space – was accomplished by the time the first part of the twentieth century was over. There had been three phases in this evolution. In the first, during

Corbin, Lure of the Sea, pp.263-269.
the first forty or fifty years of settlement, the newcomers emulated the original inhabitants in a relaxed and informal enjoyment of bathing and swimming. In the second phase, which prevailed until the end of the nineteenth century, an imported idea of the seaside or pleasure resort held sway, with social mores, backed by legal prohibitions and policing, restricting bathing to prescribed areas. In the final phase, the spread of suburban development and public transport made ocean beaches increasingly accessible, resistance to unrestricted bathing was gradually worn down, prohibitions crumbled, and universal free access to the beaches was a fact of Australian life by the time the early part of the twentieth century was over.

Has literature reflected these developments? Did the beach feature more prominently in our literature as controls were overcome and the beach became a celebrated part of Australia life? If the beach, like the bush, became an instrument in the shaping of Australians' definition of themselves, what has been the role of writers in this process? The next two chapters consider these questions, *inter alia*, as they attempt a survey and an analysis of the beach in Australian literature.
As Chapter One has shown, the process of adapting to a new land demanded intense and immediate engagement with the complex of meanings “the bush” came to represent; there was no such imperative in the case of the beach. The historical record reveals that the beach itself did not play a significant part in Australian life for more than a hundred years after the colonies were first established. The emergence of the beach as potential influence on the literary imagination is therefore relatively recent.

Major tasks of this investigation are the search for references to the beach in our literature, and exploration of the meanings given to the beach by Australian writers. Is Meaghan Morris correct - as far as literature is concerned - when she states that “a vast anthology could be compiled of beach scenes from literature, cinema, photography, painting, theatre, television drama and documentary, newspapers and magazines”?1 Does the beach really have a “bad literary image”, as Dutton asserts?2 Such generalisations are premature, given that no comprehensive survey of beach literature has so far been attempted, no genre of beach writing identified.

The work undertaken here aims to throw light on the ways in which the development over time of the distinctively Australian beach has been reflected in Australian writing. Writing about the beach should constitute a case study of the process of cultural adaptation, providing evidence about the pace and the manner in which this settler society has developed the ability to interpret a reality based on its experience of the new land itself, rather than on one mediated through perceptions and expectations imported from the colonizing culture. If indeed the notion of the beach as cultural archetype is viable, then its expression in literature is to be expected. In addition, given the connections suggested earlier in this work between ideas put forward by

2 Dutton, Myth of the Beach, p.20.
Dinnerstein and Brown and the fundamental appeal of the beach, evidence of the influence on Australian writing of such associations is anticipated.

This being a largely uncharted area of literary research, there are no earlier pathfinders to lead the way. Criteria for the omission and selection of works to be examined therefore need to be determined and made explicit.

Inspection of anthologies which purport to sample representative or influential works, or those accorded high critical acclaim, has revealed little reference to the beach experience. How widely should the net be cast in moving beyond these specialised collections to other publications? Some parameters, while not adhered to in a hard and fast fashion, have been established; for example, a loosely historical perspective is adopted in order to trace developments over time and changes in perception and attitude.

Generally, there has been a concentration in this survey on novels, short stories and poetry. No rigid distinction will be made between works of "fact" and those of "fiction", however, for there are particular reasons why one needs to be wary of this distinction when discussing Australian writing. With respect to early works, Ross Gibson remarks that

Any literature which deals with something as mutable as the perceived characteristics of a new society and its habitat must be construed as creative. Impressions, observations and fantasies regarding the country are filtered through a writer's personality, prejudices and language, so that any image which ensues must be treated as a constructed entity created by a mind which applies some order to the profusion of initial sensations. In this respect a marine officer's detailed and speciously objective description of, say, a surveying trip in the environs of Port Jackson can be counted just as creative as, for example, Erasmus Darwin's allegory.\(^3\)

And Les Murray has argued that, for reasons which will be looked at later in this discussion:

\(^3\)Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise*, p.xiv.
we [Australians] welcome time and again books of non-fiction, books which articulate even some part of our deep experience as a people, and speak to us in a level, balanced, undecorated voice we "hear" as our own. While leaving the door open for non-fiction containing insights which are relevant to the current purpose, the ephemeral writings of topical journalism or magazines will generally be excluded, the emphasis being rather on writers of higher ambition and durable reputation - except in the case of some early writings which, though slight, provide evidence of "literary" writing about the beach at that stage of our history. Durable merit is difficult to assess in the case of contemporary writing, of course; so the aim has generally been to read as widely as possible, allowing the opportunity for the unexpected and the serendipitous to yield its rewards. Mention of "quality" and "merit" could be construed as indicating that the concept of a literary canon underlies the selection of works to be considered. In much contemporary literary theory and in cultural studies writings there is hostility towards an idea of "high culture" which is perceived to be associated with any assessment of particular works as being of more worth than others. Debate about quality is eschewed, and critical assessments are trivialised as judgements based on taste, a way of carrying on the class war by other means. Thus Fiske asserts that "taste is social control - class interest masquerading as a naturally finer sensibility"; and in the grip of ideological fervour even Gibson, who often writes so brilliantly, lapses into silliness:

I want to resist the class that would maintain that fidelity to an English heritage is still the paramount virtue of 'true culture' in Australia...the classifications of culture (high, low and non) that were in force during 'the raj' have lost much of their clarity and cogency at the popular level...patrician arguments for the leavening qualities of art are appearing increasingly anachronistic... Apart from mixing up his, empires, Gibson is surely setting up a straw man. If some still mutter away in corners upholding their "fidelity to an English heritage", their influence is miniscule. There are welcome signs that retreat from the position of

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5 Fiske, Reading the Popular, p.6.
extreme antagonism towards “high culture” is under way, however: Meaghan Morris is a moderating influence, dismissing

the direct transposition of the critique of ‘high culture’ from Britain
(where it matters a lot) to Australia (where I don’t think high culture
matters much at all).7

And Goodall argues for a rapprochement between English and cultural studies, where each would value and recognise the strengths of the other:

If an obsession with the exclusiveness of High Art proved the undoing
of English, I hope that an antithetical populism does not bring about the
downfall of Cultural Studies8.

This study is in agreement with Morris in dismissing the existence of a high
culture/popular culture antagonism as a reason for refusing to engage in critical
assessment of literary works. And in lieu of theorising about the bases for literary or
aesthetic criticism, the selection which follows is defended in the following terms: in
choosing works to be discussed in these chapters, except in the case of minor works of
historical interest, writing which has been singled out for detailed critical attention
and assessed positively by contemporary critics and reviewers has been studied; for at
the very least a case can be made that such writing has captured something significant
about the age in which it was written, or has influenced later readers and critics more
powerfully than work which has been ignored or dismissed as insignificant or
mediocre. In the case of more recent writings, and to a large extent in the older ones
as well, I have looked for significant reference to the beach, as well as relying on my
own response in order to distinguish works containing fresh and vivid perceptions and
insights, felicity of expression and the powerful evocation of emotion, from those
which have little or nothing to offer.

It may well be argued that any attempt to trace the influence of the beach on the
Australian imagination should deal with the primarily visual media Morris has listed -
cinema, photography, painting and television - as well as the written word. Given

7Meaghan Morris, “A Small Serve of Spaghetti” - The Future of Australian Studies”, Meanjin, 49, 3,
1990, p.475.

8Peter Goodall, High Culture, Popular Culture: The Long Debate. St Leonards, NSW: Allen &
that there are disciplines of art, film and media studies, with their own critical theories and methods of analysis, these are paths that other researchers may well follow but which lie outside the scope of the present investigation. Similarly, no attempt has been made to deal with specialist genres such as mystery, detective or science fiction.

Following the adoption of these general criteria for inclusion in this investigation, and allowing for overlap and some imprecision in this pioneering attempt at categorisation, it has been possible to discern two main stages in Australian beach writing. The first stage spans the whole of the nineteenth century. With regard to the second, more recent stage, two generalisations can be made: some themes are constant and pervasive; and there is an increasing variety of meanings associated with the beach, testifying to the enrichment and complexity of the beach archetype which has been developing in Australian culture. The first stage, and the fundamental themes detected in both the first and the second stages, are discussed in this chapter, drawing out differences and continuities. The varied connotations of the beach in more recent literature is the subject of the next chapter.

The nineteenth century: The ocean, the sea, the shore – where’s the beach and where’s the people?

Writing in the first stage, spanning the first century of European settlement in Australia, is characterised by imaginative engagement with the land and neglect of the coast:

[the settlers] arrived on the coastline and looked inland. Behind them, distantly, was safety and truth...In front of them, immediately, was an enormity to which they felt compelled to relate.9

Writers adopted a landward perspective as they set about the task of making sense of the strange new world of the Antipodes:

9Gibson, South of the West, p.9.
The First Fleet writers were attempting to understand and describe new experience in empirical terms as the first step in a long process which might eventually lead to more evocative or symbolic treatment of the spirit of the land. Before interpretation there must be description.

Often the desire was to communicate information about this world to the people “back home”. Elizabeth Webby notes that most writing in the first period of settlement was printed outside Australia, for non-Australian readers, catering to the great interest in Europe at that time in exotic curiosities, particularly those from the realm of natural history:

In the early 19th century [there was]... an explosion of interest in natural history... Over 1000 works [that is, drawings, paintings, written descriptions and other unpublished texts] of botanical and zoological value are known to have been produced in New South Wales before the turn of the [eighteenth] century...For the first few decades after the arrival of the First Fleet a flood of specimens went back to England to satisfy the craze for this form of national amusement.

The botanists Banks and Solander on the Endeavour were only the first of a remarkable line of scientists, naturalists and artists who described in great detail and illustrated in beautiful drawings and paintings the extraordinary fauna and flora of the new land - as well as its Aboriginal inhabitants. The focus was on the minutiae, the capture of specific detail rather than the broader picture; for as Ackland points out in his Introduction to The Penguin Book of Nineteenth Century Australian Literature, a new landscape presented an acute and complex challenge to those who attempted to set down their impressions in writing. As indicated earlier (in Chapter One), reactions of the newcomers to the landscape ranged from highly positive to intensely negative. The response of Louisa Clifton on her arrival at the Swan River colony in 1841 reveals the turbulence of the emotions evoked by this experience: joy at the sight of land, sadness at the ill fate of some settlers, a keen desire to describe her surroundings precisely, dissatisfaction at her failure to capture the scenery in her sketching, excitement, homesickness, depression, mixed in with delight at the sociability of the

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12 Margaret Steven, First Impressions: The British Discovery of Australia. British Museum (Natural History) 1988? p.82.
new settlement. She reflects that "I am strangely altered when I think how seldom now I feel the thrill of enjoyment in the view of bright skies and sunny shores". It was all too much to take in; faint hope of it being sorted out and absorbed quickly.

Green categorised writings in his "First Period" as mainly non-fiction, bearing out Gibson's point about the compulsion to describe rather than to interpret this strange new world. He notes the journals of the First Fleet diarists and the early governors and explorers, the memoirs of some literate convicts; historical and descriptive prose; some pamphlets, newspapers; and the strongly autobiographical novel by a convict, Quintus Servinton by Henry Savery; with only one work arising out of sea exploration: Matthew Flinders's Voyage to Terra Australis.

Not only were the "rude waste" of the ocean and its edge with the land far less compelling than the "challenge of a new landscape"; there were important psychological reasons for an aversion to imaginative or artistic involvement with the coast. To understand the silence of writers on the subject, it is necessary to hark back to the beginnings of European settlement, and to put oneself in the place of those who made the long voyage out from Europe, whether involuntarily (convicts), in the line of duty (military, navy and government personnel) or in the hope of a better life (free settlers). Arrival in the new land meant the end of months at sea, a time of tedium and discomfort at best, more often a time to be endured with as much fortitude as could be mustered, marked by storms, seasickness, awful food, illness and death, especially of infants and small children. Some kept shipboard diaries, where

It is a feature of these early memoirs and personal records that...the writers play down the human and practical problems of that long and harrowing

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3 This is the phrase used by Raban to describe the attitude of "the professionals of the sea" (voyagers and captains) to the seas their ships traversed (Oxford Book of the Sea. Introduction, p.5.)
4 The title Ackland gives to this section of his selections.
journey. Tench writes much more fully of ports of call; he, too, is oppressed by the tedium of the months at sea.\textsuperscript{18}

It was as if those months on board were a nightmare, to be forgotten as quickly as possible.

There was one mode of self-consciously “literary” expression where the absence of the coast was not as evident as in other forms: in poetry. This is not an insignificant exception; for, as Elizabeth Webby notes:

...to study the literature written in Australia before 1850 is mainly to study poetry – though that is too grand a title for most of the ... “poetic effusions” offered to the public.\textsuperscript{19}

Green judged that “stilted and lifeless echoes of the eighteenth century in England” mark the beginnings of Australian poetry.\textsuperscript{20} Leonie Kramer later concurred: “From the literary point of view, the colony chose the wrong time to be born.”\textsuperscript{21} A reading of the poems culled by Webby bears out this collective verdict. There is a monotonous form - rhyming couplets in four- or eight-line stanzas; the tone is formal and elevated; nearly all are utterly derivative. This applies \textit{a fortiori} to poems on topics associated with the ocean and the coast, where “the grandeur of generality” noted by Bush as characteristic of eighteenth-century English poetry\textsuperscript{22} means that most allusions to the ocean or the sea could refer to England or Europe as easily as to the Australian coast – more easily, in fact, since the scenes depicted are usually grey and threatening.

“Gloom and doom” could be chosen as the key phrase summing up the subject-matter of early Australian “sea” poetry/verse. Shipwrecks were the most evocative form of catastrophe (after earthquakes) and the most common form of accident in late eighteenth-century Europe,\textsuperscript{23} and storms and shipwrecks are by far the most common subject of this verse, titles such as “Sonnet: written on a storm at sea”, “The Storm: a

\textsuperscript{20}Green, \textit{History of Australian Literature, Volume II}, p.111.
\textsuperscript{23}Corbin, \textit{Lure of the Sea}, p.234.
Fragment”, “The Missing Steamer”, “The Wreck” being sprinkled throughout the pages of early newspapers. Those not about storms and shipwrecks are mostly verses about drownings, burials at sea, feelings of homesickness and exile, and pious thoughts about God and man’s place in the scheme of things.

Even when the place where meditation was inspired by the sight of the sea was explicitly Australian, it was scarcely recognisable in the conventionally English form in which it was described. Henry Halloran, one of the more celebrated and prolific early versifiers, wrote “Australian Scenery, Bondi Bay”24 – perhaps the first literary treatment of this favourite beach; but as Webby comments, it is “neither particularly Australian nor scenic”. Certainly Halloran refers to topographical features of the beach – the “South-East point”, the “sweeping bay”, the “frowning headland” at the North-East end; but generally the beach he describes would not be recognizable to an observer of the blue-and-gold playground that is Bondi today:

Thro’ a long vista of embow’ring trees,
Which give their sear leaves to the rustling breeze,
The wide expanse of Ocean meets the eye –
The awful emblem of Eternity!

From North to South a sweeping bay extends –
The South-East point in rocky masses ends –
While here or there, upon th’untrodden shore,
Are strewed the ‘thwart. the helm. the broken oar,
The fragments of a sail, the splinter’d mast –
The fisher’s toy! The victim of the blast!
But where’s the fisher? Did the laughing gale
Close round his head? Did ev’ry effort fail?
No tongue can tell; perchance he found a grave
Beneath the azure mantle of the wave...

To the North-East a frowning headland rears
His giant form: on his rough brow appears
The scar of time: magnificently rude.
He towers above the deep:....

The white-haired waves, from Ocean’s bosom thrown,
Roll to the shore with melancholy moan...25

24 Sydney Gazette, 16 June 1831, p.4.
25 There is an editorial note at the end of the poem: “The word Bondi, in the language of the Aborigines, signifies falling, and is peculiarly apposite to the continual falling of waters at this spot.”
For Halloran, a barque disappearing over the horizon is a symbol of the brevity of life: the beach an excuse for moral homily, not a place to observe, experience and enjoy.

Another of his poems is entitled "Pages from My scrapbook of 10 Years Ago: Coogee, On the Sea-Coast". He refers to a sunset, the birds returning to their young on "this fragrant and untrampled sod"; but the burden of the poem is another religious/philosophical meditation, and Coogee, the place itself, is insignificant.

There is an intriguing exception to the general failure by the versifiers to observe and to record what actually lay before them. "Lines Written by the Sea-Side", modestly anonymous, begins with a reference to a sunset. One prepares for the usual conventional pieties, when suddenly the writer is describing an experience:

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I was not lonely - dwellings fair
Were scatter'd round and shining there -
   Gay groups were on the green,
Of children, wild with reckless glee,
   And parents that could childlike be
   With them, and in that scene...

The breezy murmur from the shore,
Joy's laugh re-echoed o'er and o'er
   Alike by sire and child -
The whistle shrill - the broken song -
The far-off flute-notes, lingering long -
   The lark's strain rich and wild.

'Twas sun-set in the world around -
   And looking inwards - so I found
   'Twas sun-set in the soul;
No grief, nor mirth, were burning there,
   But musings sweet, and visions fair,
   In placid beauty stole.
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The writer conforms to fashion in the final stanza, rounding off with worthy sentiments; the "sea-side" itself is not described; but he or she has defied convention by peopling the shore, and with happy people enjoying themselves - not shipwrecked sailors or drowned lovers. It is perhaps worth noting that this verse was written in 1827, before the laws of 1833 and 1838 made spontaneous daylight bathing illegal.

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26 Duncan's Weekly Register of Politics, Facts and General Literature, 19 April 1845, p.185.
27 Monitor, 1 November 1827, p.732.
Henry Halloran's "Australian Scenery, Bondi Bay" was written in 1831. Eleven years later another description of Bondi which also had aspirations to the literary was published:

On the right the first track to Bondi Bay. Half a mile further on a bridge across a small stream. Some good specimens of weeping birch are seen here, which, when in bloom, are singularly beautiful. There are also some fine specimens of the zamia palm, called the 'burwan' also the fern tree: and further on the right, in the bush, the fan palm, commonly called the cabbage tree, may be found: a little further on is a grassy spot, where the only trace of the European is indicated by the solitary ruins of a house. The bays in this part of the coast, closed in by rocky headlands and backed by barren rising ground, have something of peculiar loneliness about them. The solemn roar of the breakers - the confined view of the ocean - the shining sandy beach, unmarked by human feet, teach us to feel some of the finest sentiments of the poet:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods
There is a rapture on the lonely shore;
There is society where none intrudes
By the deep sea, and music in its roar. 28

There are two features of interest in this passage: first, in its precise detailing of plants growing in the area it reflects written descriptions of botanical and zoological novelties which characterised the period of discovery and early settlement. And in its concluding verse from Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage 29 it indicates the influence in Australia of the Romantic movement in literature. 30

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the blossoming of the Romantic movement in art and literature in England and Europe; and while the Romantics did not "discover" the sea, in an artistic sense, Romantic creative artists were the first to propound a coherent discourse about the sea. 31 They made the sea-shore the favourite spot for self-knowledge, with the ocean's vastness becoming a metaphor for the individual's fate. The ocean as a mirror of mankind's concerns

28 "Tegg's Almanac, 1842", quoted in Philip, Sixty Years' Recollections, p.17.
29 Byron's obsession with the sea was legendary. Throughout his life he proclaimed his love of sea bathing and declared that he had covered more miles in the water by swimming than had all other living poets by boat. (cited by Robert Escarpit, Lord Byron, un temperament littéraire, Paris, Cercle du Livre, 1955, vol.1, pp.154-5, quoted in Corbin, Lure of the Beach, p.179).
30 Barry Argyle argues that the influence of Scott and Byron lasted longer in Australian fiction than in English, Scott providing the pattern for adventure of two societies in conflict, with Byron providing the outsider-hero (An Introduction to the Australian Novel 1830-1930, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).
31 Corbin, Lure of the Sea, pp.163-183. This chapter, "The Ephemeral Journey", contains a subtle and wide-ranging exposition of the Romantic view of the ocean and the shore.
inspired some of the most memorable English poetry of the second generation of Romantic poets - Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”, for example; or Tennyson’s perfect small poem of grief and loss which is popularly known as “Break, Break, Break”.

Romantic artists were intensely influenced by the confrontation between humanity and “this energy of concentrated emptiness”. The sheer expanse of the shore provoked the desire to become one with the universe, encouraging an imaginative plunge into the waters, stimulating dreams of regression to the original source of happiness, the mother, and acceptance of one’s temporal condition. The Romantics realised that the sea symbolises the dark regions of the unconscious; Shelley’s work, for example, reveals a clear “sense of the correspondence between marine depths and psychological depths”. The ebb and flow of the tides mirror the fluctuations of the menstrual cycle and other bodily rhythms, the correspondence between bodily sensibility and the rhythm of the sea. A multitude of associations determined that the beach would become an erotic site for writers in the Romantic tradition, though not yet a scene for the free display of sensual delight. Contemporary codes of decency and taboos surrounding nudity precluded the explicit sexualisation of the beach at this time.

The Romantic attitude to swimming is first expressed in Australian poetry in Adam Lindsay Gordon’s “The Swimmer”:

I would that with sleepy, soft embraces
The sea would fold me - would find me rest
In luminous shades of her secret places,
In depths where her marvels are manifest;
So the earth beneath her should not discover
My hidden couch - nor the heaven above her -
As a strong love shielding a weary lover,
I would have her shield me with shining breast...

Oh! Brave white horses! You gather and gallop,
The storm sprite loosens the gusty reins;
Now the stoutest ship were the frailest shallop,
In your hollow backs, or your high arch’d manes.

32 Corbin, Lure of the Sea, p.166.
I would ride as never a man has ridden,
In your sleepy, swirling surges hidden,
To gulfs foreshadow’d through straits forbidden,
Where no light wearies and no love wanes.\(^{34}\)

Since it was written in a period when a distinctly Australian national identity was being shaped, it is not surprising that Gordon's "The Sick Stockrider", simple and sentimental though it is in comparison with "The Swimmer", was infinitely more popular; for the content of one deals with an unmistakably Australian, emblematic figure, while the other could have been created by any English language writer steeped in the contemporary Romantic tradition. Nevertheless, apart from its intrinsic merit, "The Swimmer" is interesting in that it is the only notable nineteenth-century Australian poem to express the emotions evoked by the experience of swimming, of envelopment by the ocean.

Romantic engagement with the sea and swimming was not evident in Australian writing generally until the twentieth century. Writing in the 1890s, George Essex Evans' poems about the sea could have been written much earlier in the century (in terms of the sentiments expressed and the generality of description; at least the iambic pentameter is gone!). "A Grave by the Sea" and "The Churchyard of the Sea" are meditations on death; of an individual in the first case, of all those who have died at sea in the second:

Death knows of no distinctions here
Beneath the rolling tide!\(^{35}\)

"The Pulse of the Sea" reflects that while the ocean might inspire awe and terror, it cannot surpass the depth, strength and nobility of human emotion:

But a line may measure the depth of the ocean
What line can fathom one human soul!\(^{36}\)


And “The Waves of the Shore”, a love poem, reveals a lack of both imagination and memorable image:

A great wind rose in majesty  
His fierce wings tore the waters wide.  
“There is no rest upon the sea”,  
The white waves sighed.

Swift for the shore leapt every crest  
Ahungering for the peace of home;  
But on the shore-line’s rocky breast  
They beat in foam.

O Wind that drives the souls of men!  
O Hearts that will not be at rest!  
Is there no power beyond our ken,  
To calm the breast?

Until my Love return to me,  
O Wind of Song, forevermore  
There is no rest upon the sea  
Or on the shore?37

Victor Daley in “A Picture” presents a word picture of a rather sinister cast:

The sun burns fiercely down the skies;  
The sea is full of flashing eyes;  
The waves glide shoreward serpentwise

And fawn with foamy tongues on stark  
Grey rocks, each sharp-toothed as a shark,  
And hiss in clefts and channels dark.38...

But the description is typical in its generality. “Tamarama Beach” seems a more promising title, but it turns out to be a love lyric with no local features at all: the poet reflects on his lost love who sat with him on the beach, but has now gone on to fame and fortune while he is left lamenting. He refers to sitting on “this grey stone” and “pebbles” on the beach, which might be found on the Irish beaches of his birthplace but not on Tamarama.39

Verses published in magazines during this period, in common with most of those referred to in this section, reflect a mood of quiet contemplation as the ocean, observed from the beach, provokes meditation on the brevity of human life and achievement, or remembrance of love past. Paterson had written:

We cannot love the restless sea,
That rolls and tosses to and fro
Like some fierce creature in its glee.
For human weal or human woe
It has no touch of sympathy.

For us the bush is never sad:
Its myriad voices whisper low,
In tones the bushmen only know,
Its sympathy and welcome glad.

And Christopher Brennan summed up the prevailing tone of Australian “sea” poems of this period in these words:

the irresistible melancholy of the sun,
the irresistible sadness of the sea.

Whenever a poem of this period is set on a beach, its imagery has a static quality: the perspective is that of a viewer describing a painting, rather than the viewpoint of one who is “in the frame”.

A few of Roderic Quinn’s verses contradict these general judgements. While some are in the conventional mode:

Ere men learnt to love and sigh
Ere his first thoughts had existence,
Here they lay, as now they lie,
Lapped in light and lost in distance,


The planting of Norfolk Island pines along beachfronts began in the 1850s, when their “framing” of ocean views could have been a factor in their appeal.
When the works of Man are riven,
And his sun has had its setting
They shall front the stars of Heaven
Him and his alike forgetting.\(^{44}\)

Others, such as “Midnight and Moonlight” and “The Sea-Seekers” celebrate the beauty of the beach and the joy of reaching it,\(^{45}\) while “Spring-Song” is especially notable in that it anticipates the celebratory verse which started to appear in the twentieth century:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sing out and be happy!} \\
\text{The Spring is at hand.} \\
\text{The grass green, and sappy} \\
\text{The trees o' the land.} \\
\text{If any care rankles –} \\
\text{Away! And behold} \\
\text{Pink feet and white ankles} \\
\text{On beaches of gold.} \\
\text{And surf that runs after} \\
\text{To kiss clinging dresses,} \\
\text{And white teeth and laughter} \\
\text{And naughty brown tresses!}^{46}
\end{align*}
\]

In prose writing, the days of swimming and splashing about in the waters of the harbour (and in the rivers and bays around other early settlements) before the enforcement of laws against daylight bathing seem to have gone largely unremarked and unrecorded. “A glorious bathe” in a river is described in The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn, but the main purpose of the description is to portray an Australian celebration of Christmas Day which contrasts in every possible way with the traditional English feast.\(^{47}\) Tom Collins swims in the river on several occasions in Such is Life, but the purpose of these activities is principally to cool off or to cross the river, and they are described only briefly. Sybylla Melvyn in Miles Franklin’s My Brilliant Career writes of enjoying “bogeys” during the hot weather in the river near her grandmother’s property, going naked and having water-fights with her girl

\(^{44}\)Bulletin, 25 September 1919, p.3.
companions. But even as beaches became popular as, first, places for picnics, later resorts or pleasure grounds, they continued to be ignored by writers. There are a few references to members of the colonial upper class picnicking or swimming at harbourside or bay beaches: Blanche Mitchell, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell writes in her diary of her flirtations with officers at a picnic at Coogee. Eliza Chomley recalled "scurrying into our bathing gowns and into the water... [from her home on Melbourne’s bayside]... Of course there were no bathing boxes or restrictions of any kind"; and (Mrs) Thomas Anna Cole in the mid-nineteenth century scorned to be kept out of the water by cold or by the threat of sharks but frequently refrained, regretfully, from bathing if there were men swimming on her part of the beach, or if the gardener was working within sight.

While most children’s books were preoccupied with bush themes or were imported from England, there is a brief reference to the coast in *Seven Little Australians*, where Judy’s banishment to boarding school follows her impulsive excursion with the younger children to the Bondi Aquarium. Other works set in this period containing allusions to the beach were written at a later time – for example, the picnic episode in Patrick White’s *Voss* and the family’s holiday beach house at Flinders in Martin Boyd’s *Lucinda Brayford* (both of which are discussed further into this chapter); and Ethel Anderson’s short story “Miss Aminta Wirraway and the Sin of Lust”, where Aminta confesses her secret longing for a gentleman of her acquaintance as she lies on the sand with her companions after they have all enjoyed a bathe at a harbour beach.

In attempting to discover reference to the beach in prose writing, magazines such as the *Bulletin* and the *Australian Town and Country Journal* have been surveyed; for these sought to promote work of literary worth, and what was published, however slight and ephemeral, and however outweighed in both quality and quantity by

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writings on other topics, provides some index of what was judged to be of interest and value. This investigation reveals that in these works also, the same imitation of English models and conventions, the same inability or refusal to observe and draw upon the distinctive characteristics of the local beach or seascape, prevailed. Thus, one story describes a girl coming to the shelter of a hut from the storm-racked beach, seeking forgiveness despite her moral ruin; her hard-hearted religious mother spurns her even as her kind, irreligious stepfather urges clemency. The dark forces of Nature mirror those in the hearts of human beings. It is reminiscent of a similar scene with Pegotty’s daughter ruined and abandoned by Steerforth in *David Copperfield* at Yarmouth, not a sunny Australian beach.

Generally, for all the reasons outlined in this and Chapter One, it was the bush and the inland which preoccupied writers and their readership in the nineteenth century - that, and the process of nation-building, in its broadest sense. The beach (especially the ocean beach) at first a discomforting reminder of the colonies’ isolation, later made inaccessible by legal prohibitions, played no part in this construction; it lacked meaning for writers, except as a place for solitude and contemplation. But even as “A Randwick alderman told a public meeting that 'the rapture on the lonely shore, the quiet most essential to residential happiness is sadly interfered with by these surf bathers'”52, the quiet disappeared, the noisy surf-bathers triumphed, and writers had to come to terms with the need to express a different vision.

**The twentieth century: The peopled beach**

*Engagement and celebration*

Gradually a new attitude began to be expressed in verses being published in the magazines - of playful, pleasurable, active human engagement with the beach; so that, instead of the melancholy tone of earlier poetry, the same scene could evoke a much merrier note:

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.. For the morning gleams with promise, and a gladness fills the land,
As I mark where young Australia goes a-romping on the sand...

And though every little footprint will be cleanly washed away,
With a happy heart the ocean joins Australia at her play.\(^53\)

This was the period immediately after the remarkable achievement of Federation, and these works may reflect a consequent widespread pride and an optimistic sense of the bright destiny which lay ahead of the new Australian race:

Sould big as is the sea’s wild soul,
Mysterious, undivined;
And hearts untamed as Nature’s,
And minds free as the wind...
A nation of sweet women,
A race of noble men\(^54\)

A playful cheerfulness became the prevailing tone:

We asked the waves to play with us
one pleasant August day;
They ran to meet us on the sand
and then they sped away...
But while we waited for them,
what did those wavelets do?
They joked by overtaking us, and
wetting us all through\(^55\).

A fairy park of colour-gums
Shatters the clouds of gray,
And, blazing like a hundred suns,
The fire of golden day
Burns down upon the sand for us
Turning the creamy strand for us
To opalescent land for us
Who love the golden day...\(^56\)

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\(^{53}\)David McKee Wright, “Young Australia by the Sea”, *Bulletin*, 20 October 1910, p.43.


\(^{55}\)“The Humorous Wavelets” (anon). *Australian Town and Country Journal*, v.76, no.1980, 15 January 1908, p.41. Since August is usually the coldest month of the year, one wonders if the writer was thinking of English seasons, echoing Henry Kendall in “Bell-Birds”: “They sing in September their songs of the May-time”.

Roderic Quinn, harbinger of the new style of poetry, even celebrated the surfer in "The Surrender":

Here, in the new day's golden splendour -
Headlands pushing their foreheads forward -
Sweet is the surfer's sad surrender
To the will of the wave, as it rushes shoreward.

Nought in his ears but the breaker's thunder,
Arrowing on through the surf he flies,
Foam about him and clean sands under,
Over him arching the radiant skies.

Yielding himself as a toy to the ocean,
Locked and mute in its fierce embraces,
Thrilled and filled with the joy of motion,
Limbs outstretched, through the swirl he races.

Here, in the gold day's new-born splendour,
Sea winds sighing in tree and cave,
Sweet it is in a glad surrender
Thus to yield to the will of the wave.\(^{57}\)

As well as expressing active enjoyment, poems during this period often focussed on the people on the beach, rather than the beach itself. After so many years during which bodies were concealed beneath layers of clothing, it is perhaps not surprising that these works express a kind of voyeurism, the gaze being blatantly directed at the forms now revealed there, especially the female.\(^ {58}\)

Thus the conventional way of writing about the beach which had been imported from Europe changed as local experience began to be described and interpreted. Yet incongruous though it may seem, one of the first novels to deal with the Australian beach was written by an English visitor: D.H. Lawrence's Australian novel Kangaroo (1923).\(^ {59}\) Lawrence writes as an outsider, his physical awkwardness in the surf an analogue of the emotional and psychological dislocation he is experiencing:

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\(^{58}\) See, for example, "A Surfing Timetable" by The Religious Editor, Bulletin, 10 December 1914, p.10; "When it Comes Home", by Dido, Bulletin, 2 March 1922, p.16; "Ho, For Sandy Bay", by Exul, Bulletin, 27 April 1922, p.16; "Plodges on the Sand", by Rupert Marlo, Bulletin, 13 December 1923, p.20 (in its description of the dark shapes of courting couples of the sand, this last verse foreshadows work of Christina Stead’s which is discussed further into this chapter).

\(^{59}\) Dates in parenthesis indicate when the work was first published. References to this novel are from The Corrected Edition. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 1995.
He ran quickly over the sands, where the wind blew cold but velvety, and the
raindrops fell loosely. He walked straight into the forewash, and fell into an
advancing ripple. At least it looked a ripple, but was enough to roll him over
so that he went under and got a little taste of the Pacific. Ah the fresh cold
wetness - the fresh cold wetness! The water rushed in the backwash and the
sand melted under him, leaving him stranded like a fish. He turned again to
the water. The walls of surf were some distance off, but near enough to look
rather awful as they raced in high white walls shattering towards him.

Of course he did not go near the surf. No, the last green ripples of the broken
swell were enough to catch him by the scruff of the neck and tumble him
rudely up the beach, in a pell-mell. 60

For Lawrence, watching people on the beach provokes him to the irritation and
ambivalence which is so characteristic of his response to the Australian people and
landscape:

To the right the sea was rolling on the shore, and spurting high on some
brown rocks... And near at hand Somers saw another youth lying on the
warm sandhill in the sun... he lay like an animal on his face in the sun... 61
Two men in bathing suits were running over the spit of sand to the surf,
where two women in 'waders' were paddling along the fringe of the foam.
Three boys, one a lad of 15 or so, came out... to roll in the sand and play.
They were extraordinarily like real young animals, mindless as opposums,
lunging about...

Freedom! That's what they always say. 'You feel free in Australia.' And so
you do. There is a great relief in the atmosphere, a relief from tension, from
pressure. An absence of control or will or form... Not the old closing-in of
Europe.

But what then? The vacancy of this freedom is almost terrifying... The
absence of any inner meaning; and at the same time the great sense of vacant
spaces. The sense of irresponsible freedom... And all utterly uninteresting...
nothing. No inner life, no high command, no interest in anything finally. 62

The references to "animal... animals" are indicative of the aversion to the physical
which underlay Lawrence's fascination with sexuality, one reason for his ambivalence
about Australia. He felt that the country encouraged sensuality at the expense of the
intellectual side of life ("mindless as opposums"; "no inner life at all"). And in
sensing an "absence of inner meaning" Lawrence detected a truth about the rawness
of Australian society: that the accumulation of shared meanings which results from

60 Lawrence, Kangaroo, p.167.
61 This image recalls Max Dupain's photograph, Sunbaker.
62 Lawrence, Kangaroo, p.22.
the acculturation of a people to each other and the land they inhabit was at a very early stage here.

Despite these reactions, Lawrence responded positively to the beach itself, and there are some lovely descriptions of it in the novel. Yet that is all they are - descriptions. While Lawrence’s thoughts on the Australian bush are still intensely evocative, he was unable to charge his portrayal of the beach with extra meaning. But this is hardly surprising; understanding of the meanings of the Australian beach being generated by the culture was slow to develop, and Lawrence was here too briefly to discern them.

An early novel of apparent relevance by an Australian writer is The Passage, by Vance Palmer (1930). The book is set almost entirely around Caloundra, which has been for many years a popular surfing beach. But in The Passage the beach is the site of holiday resort (an ephemeral settlement which fails and eventually disappears), while the central character, Lew, maintains a secure sense of place through his work as a fisherman and his closeness to nature in the tiny nearby fishing settlement. Lew and the other members of the fishing community are “grounded”, authentic, in a way that Lew’s go-getting brother Hughie, the property developer Osborne, and the holidaymakers are not:

“Choice seaside lots on easy terms”, the strident letters shouted from all sides. “the Pacific is your ocean; build your holiday home by the side of it. A pound down, and a pound per month. Get in before the crowd.”...

There were refreshment booths, motor-launches with variegated flags, and a jazz-band hammering out a brazen music that disturbed the white gulls hovering over the sandbanks...Never had the quiet shores of the Passage seen such a promiscuous crowd before. Young men in flannels and blazers strolled about bacheaded in the sunshine, or stood chatting to the girls who sat dangling their silk-stockinged legs over the breakwater.

The little group of fishermen, who had always considered the flat their own world, sat apart on empty cases near the end of the jetty, watching the invasion with curious, amused glances.63

The holiday resort, with its beach, is meretricious and artificial. The major theme of the novel is the search for meaning and stability in a country with little sense of its

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own past or of roots, poised uncertainly on the edge of an unknown future. Thus while the novel depicts a peopled beach, hence the engagement which is a feature of second stage writing, in many ways it has more in common with the literature of the bush than with the modern view of the beach. But in contrasting the fishermen’s affinity with nature with the developer’s greed for profit, Palmer alludes to a fundamental opposition within Australian society, one of concern to other writers surveyed in this chapter.

Dymphna Cusack’s novel *Jungfrau* (1936) broke new ground in its depiction of a trio of modern young women living and working in inner Sydney. Sights, sounds and places familiar to those who dwelt in that city during that period frame and map the actions of the characters: the “Sun” newspaper office, the chimes of the G.P.O. clock, King Street, the Archibald Fountain, the Botanic Gardens...rarely had Australian novels inscribed local urban scenes in such detail. The writing is rather emotionally overblown for contemporary tastes, and the novel was considered “shocking” in its day for its portrayal of Thea’s doomed love affair. The beach is introduced at several points, seemingly more as an aspect of the lifestyle of these independent women than for reasons of plot or character: two of them are invited to a weekend party at Whale Beach, by a neighbour whose only appearance in the novel is to issue the invitation. Marc, as befits a modern girl, is an accomplished “surf-shooter”:

For a moment she hung poised on the curling crest, taut, exhilarated; then with a sudden powerful sweep the wave broke and she went riding swiftly shorewards in a flurry of hissing foam.

On another occasion Thea and Eve go to Maroubra to “shoot the breakers”: enjoying the beach is part of the way of life of a “city girl” of the 1930s; but the beach is also the setting for darker events in the lives of its characters, as discussed in a later section of this chapter (pp.124-125).

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The earliest novel to have the beach as its principal setting, *Intimate Strangers* (1937) by Katharine Susannah Prichard, opens on a Western Australian beach (given a fictitious name, but clearly one of the popular beaches just south of Perth) and does not stray from it for the first half of the novel. *Intimate Strangers* contains some of the best descriptions of sea, sand, swimming and surf to be found in any novel before or since:

Such a sight it was on hot summer mornings, this tapestry of the human swarm on the beaches, under a bare blue sky. When the smoke of bush fires sent a haze out from the land, the sea, satiny calm, lifted long rollers, translucent green, against the sand. If a breeze sprang up, the azure and sapphire deepened, cut like a mighty jewel by waves that glittered on every face and flung a rising surf towards the shore.

Here and there groups of boys practised running dives, 'chesters', swallow diving, duck shooting. Girls held themselves taut and alert, ran and dived into a green wave as it reared. Men, women, boys and girls, splashed and swam, laughing and exclaiming with each other, to the third line of breakers, farther than which only strong swimmers cared to go. Children played in the last shallow wash along the shore, bowed over and tossed high on the sand by a heavy wave, now and then. Screaming with joy and quite fearless, they pranced back into the water again or lay, flat-stomached, waiting for another roller to send them flying.

When the breeze stiffened, in the late afternoon, every wave on the far-out sea carried a white feather and rollers along the sandbank became breakers, raising gigantic jaws, clear as glass and ripping foam. But the ardour of the sunworshippers never languished or waned...All day, the edge of the sea braided an eager, feckless crowd of men, women, girls and boys, diving into the combers, riding in on them: and the sand its spawn of brown and red bodies, stalwart and slender, lean and potbellied, spread in the blazing sun to dry...

The behaviour and the 'tapestry' of the crowds on the beach, the way the beach changes from morning to afternoon: the vivid and authentic detail and colour in this passage is inspired by the direct experience of a writer who cherishes the scene she describes. To compare it with the colourless and derivative nineteenth century "beach" verse is to recall one of the lessons learned by Laura Rambotham in her "getting of wisdom" in Henry Handel Richardson's novel: that her story set in Venice and based on "a play in the Shakespearean manner and a novel after Scott" turns out

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to be "wooden, second-hand rubbish", whereas writing about places known at first hand - the hills and gullies near her home or "Whitest, purest sand, hot to the touch as a zinc roof in summer" at her aunt’s beach house - has the ring of truth.

Intimate Strangers is notable for its lyrical descriptions of the beach and people at play on the beach, as well as its use of the beach to convey a deeper level of meaning in a way that was virtually unknown beforehand and uncommon for a long time after it was written. As Elodie in Intimate Strangers passes among the people on the beach "she smiled at them with shy secret rejoicing that they too were stealing ecstasy from the monotony of their workaday lives"; she is one of them. She is able to understand the feelings of the people on the beach in a way that had not been possible for Lawrence, a stranger.

Sensuality and Desire, Loss and Death - and their interconnections

Elodie’s musing on the source of the beach’s appeal in Intimate Strangers echoes the view of the beach as a setting for Dinnerstein’s “direct recapture of exotic intercourse with the surround”:

Was everyone’s encounter with the sea a rapturous embrace, a glory which fills with fire

‘The body and soul that have their whole desire
Silent and freeer than the birds of dreams are free?’

Elodie thought so, though they would not admit it. Something of passionate need drove all these dwellers in comfortable suburban homes to seaside shacks for the summer. Something more than the heat and a hankering for unlimited water.

In Kangaroo Somers feels a heightening of desire after his dip (tumble) in the surf:

when he had rubbed the wet off himself he came to her.

69 Richardson, Getting of Wisdom, p. 190.
70 Richardson, Getting of Wisdom, p. 169.
To the end she was more wondering than anything. But when it was the end, and the night was falling outside, she laughed and said to him:

‘That was done in style. That was chic. Straight from the sea, like another creature.’

Oh, ‘ow me ‘eart
Went out to her that ev’ nin on the beach...

The wet sands glistened, an’ the gleamin’ moon
Shone yeller on the sea, all streakin’ down
A band was playin’ some soft, dreamy choon;
An’ up the town
We ‘eard the distant tram-cars whir an’ clash.
An’ there I told ‘er ‘ow I’d done me dash...

The moon was shinin’ bright,
Turnin’ the waves all yeller when it set -
A bonzer night!
The sparklin’ sea all sorter gold an’ green;
An’ on the pier the band - O, ‘Ell!....Doreen!

The apparently artless vernacular of “Doreen”, where the Bloke and Doreen first acknowledge their mutual love in C.J. Dennis’ *Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915), could hardly be more different in style from Lawrence’s refined prose; but both follow a well-established Romantic tradition where the sea or the beach is associated with eroticism, the blossoming of love and the arousal of desire - sometimes in the lives of writers themselves, as well as in their work. Robert Drewe, in the Introduction to his *Picador Book of the Beach*, refers to Shelley and Byron’s love of the sea and swimming, to “the erotically minded Flaubert, who longed to be littorally transformed, with the sea’s ‘thousand liquid nipples’ travelling all over his body”, and Valery, for whom “swimming was simply, a *fornication avec l’onde*.”

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71 Prichard, *Intimate Strangers*, p.45 [my emphasis].
But the beach is also often linked with death and loss as well as sensuality and desire. It can be a place for the melodramatic suicide: Adam Lindsay Gordon - he who had written

I would that with sleepy, soft embraces
The sea would fold me - would find me rest

- ended his life by shooting himself on the beach; C.Y. O'Connor, builder of the water pipeline from Perth to the goldfields at Kalgoorlie who appears in Robert Drewe's *The Drowner* (1996) rode a horse into the surf and also shot himself, just before his project proved successful. Henry Lawson confided to a doctor that he had attempted suicide at Fairy Bower in 1902 by jumping from the path by the sea which goes from Manly to North Head, and it is said that newspapers stopped reporting suicides off The Gap, the cliff above the sea near the entrance to Sydney Harbour so as not to encourage others to emulate them.

Despite these events, and unlike the shores of the Arran Isles or other beaches assailed by wild seas and storms where drowned fishermen are washed up, Australian beaches are more commonly associated with pleasure; intimations of death rarely predominate. Yet the more one examines Australian writing, the clearer it becomes that ideas of life, love and desire are inextricably interwoven with those of loss and death. That life is fragile and precious; that loss and death are inescapable consequences and accompaniments of life; and that life is lived most fully where the inevitability of death is recognised and accepted; these are themes that emerge early and remain a constant feature of Australian beach writing.

Henry Handel Richardson drew on the Romantic associations of the beach with love, desire and sensuality in her short story "Two Hanged Women" (1934) where the sea is a silent observer of a tug-of-war for the love of a girl between her suitor (male), her Mother and the older woman/potential lover who sits on a park bench facing the sea and arguing with her. Their conflict, and the girl's repulsion from the idea of marriage to her suitor, is laid out in their dialogue, their desperate situation contrasting with the uncomplicated lust of two lovers who also take their place on the bench.

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“The stealthily heaving sea” mirrors the deep undercurrents of feeling between the protagonists. This is rather an obvious and conventional use - Ruskin’s pathetic fallacy at work - somewhat reminiscent of the film From Here to Eternity, where the lovers consummate their passion on a beach, the waves from the rising tide surging around them.

Another of her short stories, “The Bathe” (1934) reveals a striking repugnance to the flesh. Subtitled “A Grotesque”, it describes a six-year old enjoying a bathe in the sea. An idyllic scene, with the physical perfection of the child lovingly described:

Just past the dimpled roundnesses of babyhood, the little body stood slim and straight, legs and knees closely met, the skin white as the sand into which the small feet dug, pink toe faultlessly matched to toe.

The temptation to join their small charge in enjoyment of the water becomes too much for the two older women who are minding her, and they disrobe:

Tight, high bodices of countless buttons went first, baring the massy arms and fat-creased necks of a plump maturity. Thereafter bunchy skirts were slid down over hips and stepped out of. Several petticoats followed, the undermost of red flannel, with scalloped edges. Tight stiff corsets were next squeezed from their moorings and cast aside: the linen below lay hot and damply crushed. Long white drawers unbound and, leg by leg, disengaged, voluminous calico chemises appeared, draped in which the pair sat down to take off their boots - buttoned boots - and stockings, their feet emerging red and tired-looking...up went their arms, dragging the balloon-like garments with them, and inch by inch thighs, trunks and breasts were bared to view.

In cataloguing all the paraphernalia of concealment and restriction, Richardson is commenting on the way women’s bodies, and their potential, are constrained and distorted by conventional ideas of femininity and propriety. The women – and their sensuality - have been imprisoned by their clothes, as women are imprisoned by society’s expectations. Thus this description could simply be a celebration of the freedom and delight made possible by this casting-off. Certainly the play of the

77 Both “Two Hanged Women” and “The Bathe” were first published in Henry Handel Richardson, The End of a Childhood and Other Stories, London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1934.
78 Richardson, The Bathe, p.71.
79 Richardson, The Bathe, p.73.
women in the water is described; but more prominent are the descriptions of their bodies:

Two fat, stark-naked figures were coming down the beach...a haste that caused unwieldy breasts to bob and swing, bellies and buttocks to wobble. Splay-legged were they from the weight of these protuberances. Above their knees, garters had cut fierce red lines in the skin; their bodies were criss-crossed with red furrows, from the variety of strings and bones that had lashed them in. The calves of one showed purple-knotted with veins...One was patched with red hair, one with black...Waddling up the beach they spread their petticoats...And as they lay there on their sides, with the supreme mass of hip and buttock arching in the air, their contours were those of seals - great mother-seals come lolling out of the water to lie about on the sand.\textsuperscript{80}

Richardson seems to be portraying vividly, almost clinically, the physical details of the women's ageing, naked bodies, and the way they have been distorted and marked by the "bonds" of their shackling clothes. She is also hinting at the notion, old as folk legend, that in entering the sea one can be transformed into some kind of marine creature, an animal amphibian state. Is she also revealing a profound disgust at the sight? Here Dinnerstein's account of our ambivalence towards the flesh is relevant:

No matter how hard we force ourselves to look at it, death remains in a basic way mentally unassimilable, uncanny, a cold, crushing enigma...the body whose collapse is destined to extinguish the living self...becomes sacred and blasphemous: a marvel, and at the same time ghastly, repellant...this mysterious body, this body whose transience we try so vainly to feel as a fact, is loved with a special reverence for continuing, miraculously, to live, and hated with a special loathing for promising, incredibly, to die. What makes these adult feelings so hard to come to terms with is the infant background against which they are experienced...the adult's grief at mortality is preceded and preformed by the infant's grief at its lost sense of oneness with the first parent. The later knowledge that we will die resonates with the pain of our earliest discovery of helplessness, vulnerability, isolation; with the terrified sorrow of the first, and worst, separation.\textsuperscript{81}

Hence Richardson's portrayal of, first, the child in the perfection of her innocent beauty, then the women in the hideousness of their ruined bodies, is stimulated by something deeper than aesthetic appreciation and revulsion. All the positive side of her ambivalence is concentrated on the child "whose bright sentience is inseparable

\textsuperscript{80} Richardson, \textit{The Bathe}, p. 74, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{81} Dinnerstein, \textit{Mermaid and Minotaur}, p. 117, p. 121.
from its bright flesh". The story ends with the little girl’s reaction to the sight of the women:

Oh, never... never... no, not ever now did she want to grow up. She would always stop a little girl.

At one level, this indicates the child’s dawning awareness of the cramped and confined future she faces as a woman; at another level, the desire not to grow up reflects “this refusal to face death” to which Dinnerstein refers.

The beach is the place in Intimate Strangers where Elodie’s crucial experiences of love and loss – her affair and its ending, her reflections on her relationship with her husband Greg and their eventual reconciliation – occur. The meaning of the title is made clear on the first page as Elodie gazes at the rocks on the beach, reflecting on Greg’s inability to capture the depth and strength of those rocks in his painting. She sees him as a man diminished since his war experiences, lacking power and vision, “amusing himself with neat patterns, pleasing effects of colour”. The reader is taken back and forth between the thoughts of husband and wife about each other, as Elodie murmurs “The mirage is breaking up” - apparently a statement about the disappearance of a mirage of white cliffs hiding Rottnest Island, really a judgement about the loss of each partner’s illusions about the other. Yet the end of the story shows that each remains a “mirage”, a frustrating mystery to the other, particularly Greg to Elodie, who discovers that her beliefs about her husband’s character are unfounded, he emerging as a more substantial character than she, although most of the novel is seen through her eyes:

[Elodie] reproached herself with having assumed an egregious omniscience where he [Greg] was concerned. Elodie brooded over the divergence of their standards; the irony of their complex relationship... What perplexed and confounded her was that two people could live so long together, share transports and tribulations, and yet be so ignorant of the bases and sources of their most vital impulses.

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Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p.120.
Richardson, The Bathe, p.76.
Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p.122.
Later the beach becomes the setting for the affair between Elodie and Jerome. They meet on the beach; and, after Elodie and Greg have returned from the beach holiday to the city, she and Jerome snatch a perfect day of happiness together by travelling back to the beach. Their joy is short-lived, however:

Nothing existed before or beyond this time and place. But light failed from the window... the chill wind blew in from the sea, smelling of rotting kelp. The hut became dark with accumulated shadows.

"Isn’t to-day more than we have a right to expect?" Elodie faltered. "I think that it is. Having had it, we can pay any cost...there’s a doom in the air, can’t you feel it? That wind and the smell of the seaweed."87

The end of the affair is signalled rather too obviously by the signs of change and decay. And the final scene of reconciliation of Greg and Elodie naturally sees them returning to the beach and is unconvincing, involving as it does a joint commitment to fight for radical social reform as the foundation for their renewed closeness:

The wind had been cold in the early morning, fresh and exhilarating; but only sufficient remained at midday to lift the crests of the waves. The sun radiated the warmth of early summer... The bright sunshine crept through them... dispelling rancours and secret animosities... Between them burned the fire of a regenerating idea in which it seemed they would attain freedom and unity.88

Christina Stead is another early and highly significant example of an Australian writer who drew on these traditional associations of the beach with sensuality and passion. Stead may have spent most of her productive writing life overseas, but she drew heavily on the events, places and relationships of her early life in Sydney in some of her most important novels. She looked out towards the ocean and beyond rather than concentrating on the bush and the inward-looking concerns of the home culture.89 It is not strictly true that she focussed on the beach itself; rather, she was intrigued by the tides which rose and fell along the coastline, the pull of the moon on the tides, and the response in the blood of women and men to these influences of moon, sea and

87 Pritchard, Intimate Strangers, p.277.
88 Pritchard, Intimate Strangers, pp.334-335.
89 Williams, Christine, “Christina Stead’s Australia - *‘Easily the Largest Island’*, Southerly, 53, 1, p.83.
tide. The ebb and flow of the tides, and the constant change associated with them, are aspects of the beach, however, and they resonate with meaning for Stead. And Australia’s sea-surroundings are of crucial importance in her uniquely poetic vision of Australia’s place in the world, expressed through the words of Kol Blount’s “In Memoriam” in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*.  

Her first treatment of the beach is so unusual and imaginative that it stands alone - “The Triskelion” from *The Salzburg Tales* (1934), a tale of Gothic horror and evil, a grotesque European-type fantasy disconcertingly set in an Australian beachplace. The Doctress tells the story of a triskelion, a wheel made of three legs sprouting from a hub, bound at the ankles to form a wheel “rolling fast as the wind” along the beach dunes around The Entrance near Terrigal, on the New South Wales central coast. The triskelion appears as a portent of evil, just before a grisly crime or accident occurs. A wealthy family goes to a guest house there for a holiday; the father and daughter have an incestuous relationship; on the night the triskelion is seen the father rapes and murders another little girl, and his daughter murders him out of jealousy. She has a child of the incestuous union, Arnold, who is blind and deformed, and whose young wife later leaves him because he is “not natural”, depraved in his behaviour - the sins of the parents perpetuated in their offspring. A story of horror indeed, in a dark and sinister beach setting:

> The curlews cried by the lake at dawn and dusk, and nothing was more appropriate to the dreary wastes of sand-rooted underbrush, the overgrown shrubbery full of tarantulas, the dreary wastes of the turbulent ocean always peaked and foamy, and the bleak and ravaged headlands.

Stead’s tale is a precursor to later writings which portray the beach as setting for violent and primitive behaviour.

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90 Stead wrote in a letter: “In such a brilliant climate as that of Sydney...the influences of sun and moon are much greater than if they had lived in a suburb...I myself, was very subject to the moon”. (*Selected Letters, I.*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992, p.427, 10.11.72.)

91 The significance of this vision will be considered in the concluding section of Chapter Four.


93 See Chapter Four: *Destruction, violence and regression to the primitive.*
In the chapter “It was High Tide at Nine Thirty” from *For Love Alone*, (1944) Theresa makes her way along the beachfront on a night when the moon and tide are at their fullest. The chapter is suffused with a heightened intensity - everything is seen, smelt, heard and felt vividly, a sexualisation of the night to which Theresa responds:

She felt the swarm of lovers thick as locusts behind her when she turned onto the beach path...men and women groaned and gave shuddering cries as if they were being beaten. She passed slowly, timidly, but fascinated by the strange battlefield, the bodies stretched out, contorted, with sounds of the dying under the fierce high moon. She did not know what the sounds were, but she knew children would be conceived this night...and perhaps one or two [people] would jump into the sea. There were often bodies fished up round here...from these high ledges into waters washed round these rocks by the moon...Under the tarpaulin was a woman’s body: she had been fished out of the sea just outside of the cliffs that afternoon; it did not cause much comment. They lived there, among the gardens of the sea, and knew their fruits: fish, storms, corpses, moontides, miracles.

In this passage Theresa (Stead) seems attuned to Brown’s insight into the connection between “a life which is not repressed, which leaves no “unlived lives” in the body”\(^{95}\) and a matter-of-fact acceptance of the fact of death. She passionately envies

lucky women, fishers’ women, picnic women, holiday women, the wives of workers and loafers and misanthropes, who lived on boats and beaches...very likely starved, beaten, but embraced by men and endowed with men’s children\(^{96}\).

Although these women may suffer pain and deprivation, it seems to the impressionable Theresa that they experience life with an intensity unknown to pallid residents in respectable suburbia.

The belief that living out one’s desires is preferable to conforming with conventional ideas of behaviour is also implied by characters in *Jungfrau*. Marc and Oswald, whose affair begins after they meet at the Whale Beach weekend party, have the following conversation on the beach:

Marc: “I think I’d rather die on a clear bright blade than be battered to death like a sardine in a tin.”

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\(^{93}\) Brown, *Life Against Death*, p.308.
Oswald: “Then you’re not afraid of death?”
Marc: “I don’t think so... But I’d hate to be buried alive.”

Later in the novel, Thea sees a rabbit feeding as she walks down to the beach after her one night of love with Owen at his wife’s holiday cottage, and her thoughts about the rabbit are similar in sentiment to Marc’s: “Perhaps it would have preferred to die after a feast of sweet, dewy clover rather than live to a stodgy old age.” There are many proleptic details in this novel, clearly signalling Thea’s death after the end of her doomed affair with Owen. After failing to go through with an abortion she catches a tram to Maroubra, and as she walks through the sandhills down to the edge of the surf, the thought of suicide becomes overpowering. While most of the action in the novel is set in the city, critical events in the story occur at the beach.

One of Martin Boyd’s best-known novels, *Lucinda Brayford* (1946) was published not long after Stead’s *For Love Alone*. Lucinda leaves Australia when she is about the same age as Teresa, for love (or, at least, marriage), but there the similarity between the two novels ends; Boyd’s moral and artistic concerns, the social milieu of *nouveau riche* Australians and upper-class English families, all are quite different from Stead’s. Boyd is attracted, as Lucinda is, by the centuries of civilization and culture which enrich the English landscape; the nasal voices of the choir singing Christmas carols at Flinders (the family’s summer holiday spot, where the “north wind was a blast from an oven, skeletons of gum trees killed by strong salt winds”) are a travesty of the unearthly beauty of the choir of King’s College, Cambridge which later provide such joy and solace to her and, particularly, to her son Stephen. Yet the image of innocent sensuality and pleasure from her earlier life which “was printed vividly on her mind and remained there for many years” is of a day on the beach at Flinders, sitting with Tony, the family friend who loves her, laughing at her young brother Bill and his friend Blake, “the sprawling sunburnt boys” with oranges balanced atop the towels they had twisted into turbans on their heads, jumping from the “Tarpeian Rock”, a cliff which jutted out and protected the beach. As Bill and

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97 Cusack, *Jungfrau*, p.112.
Blake romp and rub coconut oil on each other, Lucinda is aware of a charge of homoerotic tension between them, but accepts this “impulse of sensuality” as an enrichment of life.

Boyd regarded the Mediterranean world of the classical period as one of innocent sensuality, its tendency to hedonistic excess redeemed by its conversion to Christianity. Pagan delight in the physical, tempered by Christian moral values, seemed to him as close to a proper balance as one could hope for. He viewed Australia as an antipodean version of the Mediterranean, the Roman name — the Tarpeian Rock — marking Flinders as a site blessed by a Christian-pagan confluence: the Christmas service and carols precede the sensuality of the picnic.

Lucinda leaves Australia; innocent harmony with the natural world does not satisfy her, but neither does the rarefied civilization she encounters in England. Memories of Flinder recur as she enjoys the beach at Saint Saturnin in France, watching Guy and Pierre, whose horseplay has the same homosexual overtones as that between Bill and Blake so many years before. Saint Saturnin is another Mediterranean (Christian) setting; but the pleasure to be found there is contaminated by awareness of the pervasive loss of Christian faith and the menacing shadow of fascism on the rise in nearby Italy. Happiness lies beyond her grasp, here as everywhere else. She recognises a pattern in her disappointed life:

"It seemed to her that it was her fate to sit apart, watching men who were less interested in her than in themselves and their own preoccupations." 101

Though Lucinda never returns to Australia, the image of the Tarpeian Rock remains significant throughout the novel. She remembered always “the sea with its dazzling white horses, the hot expanse of the Tarpeian Rock, the feel of the cool wind as it caressed her hair”. 102

101 Boyd, Lucinda Brayford, p.446.
102 Boyd, Lucinda Brayford, pp.56-57.
Fred Vane, Lucinda’s father, elects not to go to the picnic at Flinders because of the pressures of business. Vane lives in accordance with the Protestant work ethic - a corruption of Christianity which Boyd sees as characteristic of “Northern” culture - devoting himself to the accumulation of wealth. Recognition of the strength of the money-making imperative in Australia, and the capacity of the beach to subvert that drive, appears also in Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957). Early in the novel, when the exploratory expedition which Voss is to lead is in the early stage of planning, Voss turns up unexpected and uninvited as Laura and her household prepare to leave on a beach picnic. Voss is invited to join them. The party quickly divides into two groups: one, consisting of Laura, Bella, Willie Pringle and Voss, goes down to the beach; the other, the men of substance and property who are financing the expedition, sit away from the sand on the rocks talking about

... the English packet. And the weather. And vegetables. And sheep...Their scams and their muscles cracked... One young man... “the owner of a property that many consider the most valuable in New South Wales”...had begun to tell of the prevalence of worms in his merino flock at Camden...

There is a cluster of associations here: worms (corruption and death), wealth, rejection of “the life of the body”. The “men talking upon the rocks”, a static group contrasting with the activity of the others on the beach, illustrate Brown’s argument:

The more the life of the body passes into things, the less life there is in the body, and...the increasing accumulating of things represents an ever fuller articulation of the lost life of the body... “things” which are possessed and accumulated, property and the universal condensed precipitate of property, money, are in their essential nature excremental.104

The separation between those on the (living) beach and the (dead) rocks reflects the differences in their values and their preoccupations. Those on the beach respond to the life of the moment:

In the rapt afternoon all things were all-important, the inquiring mouths of blunt anemones, the twisted roots of driftwood returning and departing in the shallows, mauve scum of little bubbles the sand was sucking down...

105 White, *Voss*, p.68.
and the behaviour of the girls becomes increasingly uninhibited:

Bella had taken her bonnet off. Her hair fell gold. Her skin, too, was
golden beneath the surface of which the blood was clearly rioting and as
she breathed, it did seem almost as though she was no longer the victim of
her clothes. Ah, Bella is released, Laura Trevelyan saw and was herself
closer to taking wing... The hem of her skirt had become quite irregular,
she saw, with black scallops of heavy water.\textsuperscript{106}

Bella being “no longer the victim of her clothes... released” recalls the women in
“The Bathe”, and even Laura, who is normally imaginative and spiritual in nature
rather than sensuous, is “closer to taking wing”. These small signs are indices of a
land which is changing those who engage with it. Meanwhile, Laura and Voss,
walking along the beach together, “listened to each other’s presence, and became
aware that they were possibly more alike than any other two people at the Pringle’s
picnic”\textsuperscript{107} - a recognition of affinity foreshadowing their spiritual union.

Union of a physical kind is more often recalled and celebrated. In \textit{Clean Straw for
Nothing} (1969) George Johnston continues the story of David Meredith, reporter,
begun in \textit{My Brother Jack}; and in this second novel he recalls the early days of his
love affair with Cressida. He recounts an episode during their courtship where they
visit her parents’ home at Lebanon Bay where Cressida grew up wild and free.

If there is any particular area of one’s life which nostalgically one would
like to live through again without any change whatever - I am pretty sure
this would be it...\textsuperscript{108}

Meredith (Johnston) recollects the special quality of that moment of time in words
similar to those of Elodie to her lover Jerome in \textit{Intimate Strangers}:

\begin{quote}
\textit{everything has been held in a long pause within the sea and the sand
and the winds and the high sky...Should we ask for more than this?}\textsuperscript{109}
\end{quote}

Meredith and Cressida’s lovemaking is described and remembered with a nostalgia
made especially poignant by the fraught nature of their relationship in later years:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{106} White, \textit{Voss}, pp. 70, 68.
\item \textsuperscript{107} White, \textit{Voss}, p. 74.
\item \textsuperscript{109} Johnston, \textit{Clean Straw for Nothing}, p. 60.
\end{itemize}
We made love in the cool water of the pool, with Cressida’s hair feathered about her in the rock crevices and trailing and drifting across green weed and the star patterned limpets, and a crimson crab as miniature as a brooch sidled off, and there was a pink sea-anemone pulsing beside us a steady roseate fleshy breathing rhythm ... The frills of surf sucked and licked and whispered around the neck of our wine-bottle and the hissing and the kissing of the sea seemed a part of our union...we seemed an inextricable part of some absolute congress of nature, as if sand and sun and sea were all sentient and conjoined with our own conjunction.

In Christopher Koch’s *The Doubleman* (1985), Richard first feels the stirrings of desire and falls in love with the older woman, Deirdre Dillon, at the beach on his cousin’s country farm. His youthful imagination is stimulated by the sight of the beach under moonlight:

> It was the dangerous time, when the extraordinary might happen. Seagulls became brilliant as creatures sculpted from snow, wheeling above tangles of iodine-coloured kelp: and the rubbery green creeper called pig-face, with its blazing pink flowers, glowed among the rocks like no earthly plant. Spirits were watching us from the marram grass, I thought, and the salt-white chain of beaches, going north up the coast, reached amazing distances: tiny, uttermost territories of spume and violet mountain, no longer part of the island, nor of any ordinary world.

At the end of the novel, after some lyrical descriptions of the beaches on the Pittwater peninsula, with their “tiny figures of board-riders fixed like dreams on the bottle-green prows of breakers”, he arrives at the Palm Beach house where he learns of the death of his first love, Deirdre:

> The rocks had always been waiting, these honey-coloured slabs, these wave-sculpted barriers and entrances of ancient New South Wales. She lay still among the stones of the beach...a piece of Harbour flotsam.

The beach is associated not just with the death of desire, the end of the affair, but with the finality of death itself. Richard’s vision of Deirdre as “a piece of harbour flotsam” draws upon what for many writers has been a compelling image of death and absence. Tim Winton reflects that

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In dark moments I believe that walking on a beach at low tide is to be looking for death, or at least anticipating it. You will only find the dead, the spilled and the cast-off. Things torn free of their life and their place.\footnote{\textit{Tim Winton, Land's Edge}, p.45}

Confrontation with "the dead, the spilled and the cast-off" is also noted by Bruce Beaver:

- Bones and shells that are the bones of time,
- Sand that is the dust and ash of time,
- The skeletons of coral and of years,
- Past burials of wood and weed in effigy
- Of death trailing the tides' careless fingerings...\footnote{Bruce Beaver, "Seawall and Shoreline", in \textit{New and Selected Poems 1960-1990}, St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1991, p.31.}

In Beaver's poetry death, as well as life, is strongly linked to the beach:

- Death beckoned me towards the beach...
- Whether in heat or chill air I moved beside the ocean it was death that led or accompanied me - Not mine, but the myriad around me in the streets...
- Up from the beach or down from the hill I'd watch death knock at many doors and the dead come out and move towards the ocean, go lightly across the sand or heavily dragging reluctant feet to fade into the neverending cortege of the waves...\footnote{Beaver, "Death's Directives II", \textit{New and Selected Poems}, pp.161,162.}

and Beaver sees in the figures sculpted by the sand modeller at Manly beach an image of the brevity as well as the endurance of human life:

- the blank looks and wholly calm, coloured faces of this and that grouping of his repertoire, no larger than life yet agelessly impermanent as the paradox itself, the brief and everlasting human story written on the lapsing sands.\footnote{Beaver, "The Entertainer", \textit{New and Selected Poems}, p.194.}

For Andrew Taylor also, sand, the ground-down residue of organic and inorganic forms, is a reminder of universal dissolution and decay:

- Such a conglomerate of silica and little shells.
- Little deaths...
Sand
is miniscule bone, it hugs
flesh, toes, shins. I don’t understand
how we can turn into sand, who
love it as beaches, houses, who
love more than our own dismay. 118

Shells and the other detritus found along the highwater mark evoke similar associations. Discussing her novel Night Surfing (1996), Fiona Capp comments on the behaviour of Marcus, a widower living in a beach town. Mourning the loss of his wife, who died tragically young of cancer, he obsessively collects, classifies and houses in special cabinets things cast up by the sea:

He has become a connoisseur of debris, live and dead, man-made and natural, organic and inorganic...they have a connection with his own emotional life and sense of loss. Shells are symbols of absence, of the animal that is no longer there, and so they connect with his sense of loss over his wife. 119

Death and life are the fundamental themes of The Seal Woman, by Beverley Farmer. As in her previous work, the effect is achieved through a steady accumulation of vivid, detailed visual imagery. Death recurs throughout the novel. It begins on the first page, with “white worms” on the beach which “feed on the corruption”. 120 The narrator, Dagmar, is Norwegian, living in a beach house on the Victoria coast while its owners are away overseas. Her husband, Finn, had drowned in the North Sea, his body never found. Humanity’s contribution to the death-dealing properties of the sea is pervasive: the high tide leaves behind on the beach “polystyrene cups, plastic bags...and everywhere the ringed plastic six-pack-holders that in the water clench in a ruff of face on the necks of diving birds”. Seals are rendered sterile by dioxins washed into the sea. She reflects that “the sea is a blood bath...it is so full of death”. 120

But "the sea [is also] the mother of life. Salt water as the mother of our blood..."\textsuperscript{121}

When she prepares to return to Norway, after years of sterility, Dagmar is carrying the seed which will become a child in her womb:

Different kinds of loss appear in a scene from \textit{Bones}, by Gabrielle Lord. Joss, formerly a top Sydney surgeon but now in hiding from a vengeful criminal, arranges to meet his estranged wife Sybil at Lighthouse Beach, Seal Rocks, where their love was first consummated and their daughter Polly conceived. Sybil initiated this contact, perhaps with a view to reconciliation, and Joss’s mind fills with memories of their life together as he approaches the meeting-place on the beach. Their son died in a firebombing engineered by Joss’ pursuer, and a sense of loss hangs heavily over husband and wife: “Three crows jeered around something dead where the dune grass met the beach”.\textsuperscript{122}

As they renew contact with each other, Joss realises that Sybil has changed. Even while he senses that they could be close again, at another level he realises that the reality is more complex: “he watched her body shaking and then looked over the dunes to where a sea eagle circled on a thermal, moving higher with each lazy curve”\textsuperscript{123}. Just as the sea eagle drifts upward on currents of air, so their lives have moved on. And while they later make love passionately, “he knew now that it was impossible”, as she walks away from him for the last time.

Robert Drewe’s short story from his \textit{Bodysurfers} collection, “The Manageress and The Mirage”, conveys a sense of the dislocation caused by death. A family sits down to their first Christmas dinner since their mother died. As the children look out the window towards Rottnest Island, the island seems to split into three. Annie, the young daughter, notices something strange: “It’s gone wrong... the lighthouse has gone”\textsuperscript{124}. Death of a parent shakes the world to its foundations so that even something as solid as a lighthouse can disappear, and Rottnest Island disintegrate.

\textsuperscript{121}Farmer, \textit{The Seal Woman}, p.302.
\textsuperscript{123}Lord, \textit{Bones}, p.137.
In *Truce* (1994) Georgia the narrator returns to the island in Bass Strait where her family spent many happy holidays to scatter her father’s ashes. The task completed, she achieves acceptance and a letting go of the past as she contemplates the sea:

> Oh, perfect day. Shining bays and all the circles: clouds, tides, colours. I can see the patterns of the currents in the sea, trying to make sense out of volume. And what a force it is, the attempt to make sense and how finally defeated...

> I know what cannot be, I know it in some way I never knew before. The Island can never be anything but the Island: the record of life as it has been made cannot be rewritten. Fathers are dead and cannot be made to live, corporal, solid, the way that childhood once looked.\(^{125}\)

In *Bombora* (1996), little Annabel’s young mother Madeline dies shockingly and unexpectedly.

> After the wake the cousins had collected her and taken her down to Maroubra Beach. They sat on the sand and ate Scotch Fingers until Annabel decided she wanted to go in. The cousins clustered around her like bodyguards, forming a phalanx as they trooped into the waves. Even when their feet left the ground they floated around her. She had a wall of cousins.\(^{126}\)

Annabel was with her mother when she suddenly died, so she is special, vulnerable: the beach is by unspoken agreement the place to go to after the wake, but with the world turned upside down by catastrophic loss, an anxious sense of human fragility, that by taking extra care the dangers might be kept at bay and normality return, hangs in the air.

The beach is also associated with loss in *The Under Wharf*, (1995) by Gaby Naher. The narrator Sophie and her friends, already far gone with drugs and alcohol in preparation for New Year’s Eve celebrations, wend their way down to the beach at Bondi to watch the last sunset of the year. Here Sophie remembers her beloved grandmother Nella, who a few years earlier had ended her life at Bondi rather than slowly die of cancer: “Having cleared the breakers, she swam further and further out

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\(^{126}\) Tegan Bennett, *Bombora*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, pp.5-6.
to sea. This is how I imagined it.”\textsuperscript{127} She watches her oldest and best friend Sam in
grotesque embrace with drug dealer Billy and “the fool’s sense of belonging I’d been
nurturing fell away with a graceless thud.”\textsuperscript{128} She slips away from the group and as
“warm healing tears” run down her cheeks, she realises that

It was loss I was overcome by: the loss of a friend, the loss of a sanctuary,
The loss as always of my grandmother, and finally the loss of an excuse to
stay in Sydney. Sam and I were no longer in it together.\textsuperscript{129}

Despite the sadness of her growing apart, for the first time it seems possible that
Sophie might be on the way towards overcoming her self-destructive anger.

The beach symbolises lost innocence in Janette Turner Hospital’s short story “Bondi”.
Cass feels a little envious of the excitement of her cousin Leigh’s life, her own
appearing boring by contrast. Leigh had played the part of bad girl till “it’s like a skin
she can’t shed”; now on the run from a violent boyfriend, she has gone off with a
young man she met after a fight on the beach the previous day. As Cass walks on the
beach she steps on a discarded hypodermic:

There are hundreds of condoms and hypodermics...This is the spot where Deb
[Cass’s daughter] was playing with her bucket and spade.\textsuperscript{130}

Cass then realises that she yearns to go back to the time before she and Leigh were
soiled by life. The beach reflects this loss, the scattered hypodermics and condoms
the signs of degradation. Its purity can be restored, however:

In the distance, she can see the sandsweeper beginning its daily work... the mesh
drum gulping in dreck and leaving a plume of pure sifted sand in its wake.\textsuperscript{131}

While human lives are not so easily put right, every new day brings new possibilities.

In \textit{A Night at the Pink Poodle} by Matthew Condon (1995) the narrator Icarus is lost in
the darkness at Stradbroke Island after his borrowed cabin cruiser is left stranded by

\textsuperscript{128} Naher, \textit{The Under Wharf}, p.165.
\textsuperscript{129} Naher, \textit{The Under Wharf}, p.169.
\textsuperscript{130} Janette Turner Hospital, “Bondi”. in \textit{Collected Stories}, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press,
1995, p.244.
the tide. On the beach he stumbles across his "first dead body", a young boy drowned and washed up there. He sits besides the body throughout the long starry night, telling him about the pains, the fears and the joys of growing up, eventually falling into a deep sleep. His solitary encounter with death releases him from the fear caused by his inexperience with the boat, and energises him with a sense of the wonder and fragility of life. He guides home the boat without difficulty and spends the afternoon making love to Jordan:

We held each other tightly in that watery light as if it was about to lift us, to carry us up, and wash us out to sea.  

"The joy that cannot be felt while death is denied" is expressed with extraordinary and heartwrenching simplicity in Michael Gow's play Away. On the beach Harry tells Jim that his (Harry's) and Vic's teenage son Tom is suffering from a terminal illness and will soon die. He sums up their response to this tragedy:

In a funny kind of way we're happy. Even while we're very, very sad. We don't look back and we don't look forward... We have this boy and we don't have him for long. And whatever he does, that will have to be enough.

The beach's openness and lack of definition make it a kind of tabula rasa onto which one's deepest feelings are projected; a place unconstrained by the structures and conventions of society or civilization where innermost thoughts are more easily expressed.

Conclusion

In attempting to sum up changes from the first to the second stage of writing about the beach in Australia, one is confronted by an apparent paradox. There are clear and important differences between writing about the beach in the first stage and that in the second. In the first stage the tone is melancholy and gloomy; in the second it is celebratory, vivid, bright and colourful. The first stage beach is a lonely place from which a solitary observer views the sea; the second stage beach is occupied by people who are more active than contemplative; their comings and goings at the beach are

131 Hospital. "Bondi". p.244.
interwoven with their stories, with the events of their lives. The beach in the first stage prompts religious and moral reflection; religion, at least of the pious and conventional sort, is far from the minds of the people on the beaches of the second stage.

Yet despite their great difference in tone, the major themes from the first stage - of love, loss and death - persist and appear with striking frequency in the second stage. That love continues to be associated with the beach is not surprising; but again the tone of references to love and desire differ greatly between the two stages. Those in the first conform with contemporary notions of decorum and restraint, and so are gentle rather than passionate. As Corbin has demonstrated, from the early days of the Romantic movement the associations of the beach implicitly demanded that it would become an erotic site, and this potential was increasingly realised in the second stage: the idealised love of the first stage became sexualised, its connotations of passion and desire now frankly explicit.

What is more surprising - because of the pervasive impression of pleasure and delight as the modern beach's principal features - is the frequency of allusions to loss and death. The old dread of the beach as the place where wrecks and the victims of the sea's destructive powers are cast up; symbol of the yawning gulf between the homeland or the lover of cherished memory; the lonely strand where thoughts of storms and of vanished loves cast a gloomy pall: these connotations have largely vanished. How is it, then, that death and loss are such recurring themes?

The beach is now a place where writers depict their characters as primarily enjoying themselves but also talking about death and loss, or feeling with heightened intensity the impact of such events as they have played themselves out in their lives. And the paradox - that life and pleasure, death and loss, are "celebrated" together in modern beach writing - is resolved in its hint of the reconciliation which Dinnerstein calls for, of enjoyment of love and life with acceptance of death and its inevitability - an enjoyment and an acceptance so succinctly expressed in Harry's words in Away.

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134 Corbin, The Lure of the Beach, p.171.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE BEACH IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE II:
GIVING VOICE TO THE ARCHETYPE

The whole of Australia and the experience of her people
(except the vulgar journalist’s side, crowd life, Bondi Beach, surfing and all that not
worth writing about) are in her poetry.

Recent and contemporary writings are characterised by an increasing flexibility and
range of imaginative associations with the beach as writers, having in common with
other Australians a lifetime (or generations) of experiences and memories of the
beach, draw upon these to enrich the meanings they ascribe to the beach even as
acquaintance over time familiarises it. The result is a broader range of connections
and ideas, sometimes working with fundamental aspects of life and death, but often
novel and rich, sometimes matter-of-fact, taken-for-granted, suggesting an
accommodation to the beach by those who are now at home with it, more at ease, less
“self-conscious” than when it was all new, to be celebrated or treated metaphorically
by using, however imaginatively, conventional literary associations.

If, as Simon Schama concludes in Landscape and Memory, “The sum of our pasts,
generation laid over generation, forms the compost of our culture”, perhaps enough
time has elapsed for “the compost of our culture” to have begun to accumulate, for a
deposit of direct experiences to lie fallow, gather meaning, nourish developing
archetypes and be imaginatively transformed in ways that are apprehended and
appreciated by others who share sufficiently similar experiences. Ross Gibson finds
possible cause for optimism “as the third colonial century commences” in

the development of this sense of subjective immersion in place, this ability
to place and think oneself in systems of settlement other than the
acquisitive processes of conquistadorial survey...

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1 A.L. Rowse, on Judith Wright, in Blackwood’s Magazine, March 1980, quoted in the Sydney Morning
3 Gibson, South of the West, p. 18.
Gibson refers to Watling, the convict writer, as one of the earliest to face the task of negotiating the gradual formulation of himself as a speaking subject who can establish a local set of signifiers through a process of myriad tiny adjustments to the imported European system of meaning...slowly...the complex of European meanings comes to be altered...local phenomena begin to be perceived and comprehended in terms which are somehow specifically (which is not to say, essentially) Australian. The adjustment is a long and subjectively painful process.

Perhaps this adjustment is becoming more evident: perhaps it is also not too fanciful to suggest that the “sense of subjective immersion in place” to which Gibson refers has been facilitated by the common experience of actual immersion at the beach.

This chapter looks at the range of ways in which meanings of the beach have been expressed and reflected in late twentieth-century Australian literature.

**Childhood and the beach**

There are several reasons why the beach experience is particularly intense in childhood. The beach is the perfect playground, and play is the child’s serious business. Habits and patterns of playing at the beach lay down memories and attitudes which colour adult experience; and in their openness to sensory stimulation and capacity to enjoy the moment, children exhibit in its purest form that “erotic intercourse with the surround” of which Dinnerstein writes.

One would expect the significance of the beach in the lives of children to be primarily reflected in two kinds of writing: autobiographical accounts of childhood and

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1. Gibson, *South of the West*, pp.41-42.
2. Gibson’s references to “systems of settlement” in relation to “immersion in place”, and Schama’s metaphor of “the compost of our culture” exemplify a chronic semantic difficulty encountered when one is trying to “foreground” the beach: all the relevant metaphors are of the land, or agricultural, not coastal. We could just as well, if not more appropriately, write of a gradual surge of meaning up from the depths of consciousness, as in our coastal environment, nutrient-rich upwellings of ice-cold currents from the deepest Antarctic oceans mingle with warmer coastal waters and bring life to marine plants and animals. (Here is an “antipodean” association - of coldness rather than warmth - with fertility).
children’s literature. Certainly the comments of writers show how vividly childhood beachgoing is remembered. Robert Dessaix reminisces:

And there were all those childhood summers – what Australian child doesn’t remember them? - salty, sandy summers that felt six months long because of all the emotional upheaval, growing up and expeditions out into the world they brought with them...

Tim Winton, contrasting his two childhoods – one suburban and normal, the other apparently all summer and wholly at the beach, reflects

I often wonder about these two childhoods of mine, the one contained and clothed, between fences, the other rambling, windblown, half-naked between the flags. Is it just nostalgia? Have I idealised these summers and chased their myth all my adult life? ...No...It’s just that I lived the coastal life harder, with more passion.

In accordance with John Colmer’s view that it is pointless to adopt a rigid definition of autobiography, both autobiographies and novels with strong autobiographical elements are looked at in order to discover whether the significance they accord the beach supports Dessaix’s and Winton’s judgments.

**Autobiographical accounts of childhood**

There is no shortage of references to Australian childhood. Richard Coe writes that “proportionately to their numbers, Australian writers write more, and more frequently, and as likely as not better, about themselves-as-children than do those of almost any other cultural group outside France and England.” Given this wealth of material, there are fewer recollections of the beach than might be expected. The pleasure of summer holidays at the beach is vividly recalled in *The Education of Young Donald*:

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1 Robert Dessaix, “The Best Year of their Lives”, Good Weekend, the Sydney Morning Herald, 4 January 1997, p.17.
2 Tim Winton, Land’s Edge, p.8.
Some days my cousin and I spent the whole time either on the water’s edge, building sandcastles and then tunnelling water into them so that they fell down, or jumping around in the surf... We would lie on the beach, our backs turned up, our checks pressed down into the sand, to achieve the mahogany stain that marked the true White Australian. We would go crimson quickly, then so quickly brown that the scorched skin came off in long white strips...

It was at Cronulla every summer, in the renewal of our skins, that we bore witness to a truth that was self-evident to us every day of the year: that the most important part of human destiny was to have a good time.  

Graham McInnes remembered fondly his enjoyment of the beaches “Stretching in a great arc thirty-five miles from Port Melbourne to Sorrento and Portsea” near his Melbourne home in the 1920s. For Randolph Stow (as Rob Coram) the times he swam at West End beach were precious:

It was on the beach that the boy liked his father most. He would cling to his father’s freckled back and his father would swim away, out into the deep water, where it was dark blue instead of pale green. He would slip off his father’s back sometimes, and swallow a lot of water, and choke with excitement. He was in love with the sea, and more than anything wanted to swim.

And the paradis-perdu element of childhood autobiography, regret for an idealised past which can never be recaptured, is exquisitely expressed in Kate Llewellyn’s small poem “Australian Childhood Landscape”:

Our veins grow in the landscape of our childhood
at Tumby Bay
my three small brothers
and I played
on a yawning beach
salt white
daisy bushes grew and blew
while we brown children ran and swam
Father fished and sailed
and Mother watched
There were no divorces...
For all that, the beach does not loom as large in Australian autobiographical writing as might be expected. In accounts of deprived childhoods spent in cruel or dysfunctional families, reasons for its absence are obvious: the child Albert Facey in *A Fortunate Life* was too busy working and being beaten on farms to have the time or opportunity to play on the beach. But a more subtle reason might be the influence of what Coe discerns as the dominant myth in Australian Childhoods: of a love-hate relationship with the surrounding culture. He argues that intense emotional ambivalence arises out of the conflict between the child’s passionate love for the Australian bush, with its “unbelievable beauty”, and his or her “half-nauseated contempt” for Australian suburban civilization. The Australian beach, as was pointed out in chapter two, was first a *suburban* beach, so where it was not idealised as a holiday place, the beach may have been besmirched by its suburban associations. David McCooey also notes that an ambivalent or historical note is sounded early in Australian autobiographies, that “Eden” is soon penetrated by disillusioning reality.

It is notable how many autobiographical writers, especially those of an earlier generation – Miles Franklin, Henry Handel Richardson, Randolph Stow, Graham McInnes, Maie Casey, Martin Boyd, George Johnston, Hal Porter – either left Australia or spent long periods overseas. Coe sees the challenge for Australian writers as being to somehow fashion a new, authentic culture “not in spite of the crowd, but precisely out of the non-culture which is the crowd.” Taking up this challenge – but describing movement towards a “new authentic culture” rather than fashioning it – is of course one of the purposes of this study.

In general, it seems that Australian autobiographies have more to tell us about Australian writers’ relationship to their culture than about the meanings of the beach being generated by that culture.

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15 His collective name for accounts of childhood which are predominantly autobiographical.
Books written for children

There are some delightful picture books which capture the joy and wonder of a day at the beach for young children. The boy narrator of *Blue and Gold Day* (1979)19 wants “this to last forever” - the kind of day we remember fondly as adults. *Don’t Get Burnt!* Or *The Great Australian Day at the Beach* (1985) has vivid, detailed pictures of the great variety of activities, people and things that are typically found on a popular Australian beach, authenticating the child’s own experience - a valuable function in a culture when so many books have historically presented an imported reality.20 The enchantment of things found at the beach meshes with imagined adventures there in the exquisite pictures of *Magic Beach* (1990).21 Imagination is linked with humour in *The Giant’s Tooth* (1993)22 and *My Hippopotamus is On Our Caravan Roof Getting Sunburnt* (1989);23 *There’s a Sea in My Bedroom* (1984)24 is a gentle tale for small children frightened at the beach by the vastness of the sea; and *Russell and the Star Shell* (1990) tells of the continuity of families over the generations through the child Russell’s finding of the second of two star shells at the beach which were dipped in gold and made into earrings for Russell’s grandmother, and which Russell’s wife now wears.25

These stories arrived surprisingly late on the Australian literary scene, however. Up until the 1950s parents who wanted to read to their children had to rely on imported books, apart from the few classics mentioned in Chapter One. Older children who could read were in the same position (except for the school magazines surveyed by

19 Balderson, Margaret, *Blue and Gold Day*, illustrated by Roger Haldane, no publisher given, [1979].
21 The importance of this “authentication” struck me the first time I rode on a London train. It went clickety-clack! For years Australian kindergarten teachers read stories about trains that went clickety-clack; but our trains made a different kind of sound because they run over rails which are joined by a different method. Such stories either taught children to disregard the evidence of their own senses or that they could not be taken seriously.
Geoffrey Dutton in *Snow on the Saltbush*). Imitating imported adventure stories, Jean Curlewis wrote two books in the 1920s, *Drowning Maze* (1922) which was of the ripping-yarns-for-boys style, with some of the action taking place on the waterways around Sydney, and *Beach Beyond* (1923), another adventure story which contains a colourful description of a surf carnival. Stories which took the bush as their setting predominated in the 1950s and 1960s as more books began to be published here or co-published here and overseas.

Joan Phipson’s *Six and Silver* (1962) is partly set on the beach, partly on a property and on a bushwalk/camping adventure. In depicting the different competence of children from two families in the two different settings – the Steadmans “at home” in the country, the Moorlands on the beach – the point is made that some of us function well in one milieu but not in another; we should not be threatened by the expertise of others, but rather learn from it. Later books like *Surfie* (1966), *Looking for a Wave* (1973) and *Puberty Blues* (1979) capitalised on the newly fashionable surfie culture.

In the 1970s the first of a number of modern fantasies set on the beach was published: Lilith Norman’s *A Dream of Seas*, (1973) is the story of a boy who has moved from the country to a flat at Bondi Beach with his mother after his father drowned in the river, his body never found. The boy becomes obsessed with the idea of his father now being at home in the sea, with seals, and with the boardriders who look so like, seem almost to have become, seals. He increasingly loses touch with reality until the end, on the board and in the wetsuit he has saved to acquire, he becomes a seal, at home now in “the joy and freedom” of the sea. It is a story about the shifting, fluid boundaries between life and death, sea and land, animal and human life, constraint and freedom.

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Beyond the Labyrinth (1988) is a science fiction/fantasy tale of children meeting an alien. The story is full of ambiguities: the alien, Cal, lives in a cave on the beach, (thus neither on the land nor in the sea), is first thought to be a boy, then turns out to be a girl; whether she is child or adult is not clear. Michael, the boy who takes after his parents in their crude physicality and disregard for the environment, cannot handle Cal’s ambiguity and rejects contact with her. The ending is ambiguous: the reader chooses one of two endings, depending on the throw of a dice. In the first, Brenton, the sensitive brother who feels an alien himself, a stranger to his family, goes back with the alien to her home planet, despairing of the future of humanity; in the second, the alien dies and Brenton opts for life and for taking personal responsibility for change by deciding to become a plant geneticist when he grow up.34

In “The Lifesaver” Jemmy sees a girl somersaulting through a wave at the beach; when she disappears he thinks she has drowned, but no-one else has seen her. An old woman at the beach tells him about Maire, a girl who drowned a century ago trying to save her little sister from drowning in a rip. Later Jemmy gets caught in the rip, and his growing fear intensifies as a shark swims near him. As he is swept towards the rock, he feels beneath him the strength of the shark, whom he now realises is Maire, and he rides the shark onto the beach:

Her beautiful silver-grey skin glinting in the sunlight. I felt like laughing out loud in sheer joy.35

It is interesting to see the much-maligned shark portrayed so positively. The old woman had suggested to Jemmy that Maire led children into danger out of revenge for the indifference of adults to her own drowning. Perhaps she recognises in Jemmy—who is adjusting to the recent separation of his parents—another troubled child.

The Secret Beach (1995) finds Emily, dislocated and without friends, in a strange beach town with a father she has never met before, her mother away working in Hong Kong. She makes friends with Margaret, the local “madwoman” who had married a merman and lived in the sea with merpeople for ten years; now she lives alone near

34 Gillian Rubinstein, Beyond the Labyrinth.
the beach (the story was inspired by Matthew Arnold’s poem “The Forsaken Merman”). Drawn to Margaret in her isolation, Emily visits a tiny secret beach with her and longs to meet, to join, the merpeople when they visit the beach at the next full moon. But Margaret manages to persuade her that “when you’re human you can be everything, a creature of the land and sea and sky.” Margaret’s merchildren rescue her and Emily from drowning at the beach and Margaret realises that her separation from them is not absolute after all: “We’re not so separate any more. I’d forgotten...that the beach is where the land meets the sea.” Emily abandons her desire to escape with the merpeople, accepts an offer of friendship from schoolmate Rachel, and accommodates to life with her father in the beach town.

It is notable that all the children in these stories are outsiders or from separated families; it is as if the fissure in their lives creates a space for fantasy. The special and/or ambiguous status of animals - of seals, shark and merpeople - has also become a feature of recent books with a strong environmental message - Where the Whales Sing, Blueback - which deal with the coast rather than the beach and portray creatures such as dolphins, whales and a giant blue groper, in intimate and lifesaving encounters with humans.

As in works for adults considered in the previous chapter, the beach functions as a place where children learn to come to terms with death. A Dream of Seas is about a boy dealing with the death of his father. In Lucy’s Bay, pictures of the beach are dark and sombre. Sam is on summer holidays with his grandad: “the night sounds here were terrible.” The sea-wind moans and reeds whisper, calling him to a tiny bay. The summers pass, but still Sam has not been there. At last he decides to go - “Pop had been hoping this day would come.” Sam’s sister Lucy had drowned there when Sam wandered off while he was meant to be minding her. Sam finds the memorial stone for Lucy at the bay, and seeds from the reeds which have landed on the sand. He picks them up and blows them away: life reaches down even into “this awful place”

37 French, Secret Beach, p.141.
40 The significance of these works is considered in the conclusion to this chapter and in Chapter Five.
and he has a part to play in its continuance. Sam turns away and for the first time wonders what lies beyond the shores of Lucy’s Bay. In confronting a place of such horrific memories, he is able to move past his and Lucy’s tragedy and go on with his life.\(^\text{41}\)

In *Sophie’s Island*, Sophie stays with her aunt and uncle’s family at Banksia Beach after her baby brother’s stillbirth. They tell her a story about Jacob’s Island and it becomes for her a symbol of loss. In the end, she puts the red jumper she knitted for the baby in a basket and pushes it out into the sea to float towards the island. She makes a bracelet for her mother of stones collected on the island, as in the story Jacob made a bracelet as a token of his love.\(^\text{42}\)

There is also an element of hostility to the beach in some works written for children. Critic Heather Scutter sums up the reason for this negativity: “In the neo-Puritan mindscape, to continue to live by the sea is to indulge in hedonism and escapism, to dwell in neverland, to refuse to grow up.”\(^\text{43}\) Thus in *Storm Boy* (1963), Storm Boy lives wild and free with his hermit-like father, his school the marvellous natural world of the Coorong and Ninety-Mile Beach, his tutor the old Aborigine Fingerbone Bill: “Fingerbone knew more things than anyone Storm Boy had ever known”;\(^\text{44}\) and when Storm Boy finds a shell midden he reflects that “If I’d lived then, I’d have been a little black boy.”\(^\text{45}\) Although the captain and crew of the tugboat rescued by the Boy and Mr Percival the pelican offer to pay to send him to boarding-school, the Boy refuses to leave until Mr Percival dies. Mr Percival’s burial is both a ceremony of mourning for the death of the bird and a mark of the end of Storm-Boy’s childhood:

> When they’d finished, Storm-Boy stood for a long time looking silently all around him. Then he turned to Hide-Away


\(^{45}\) Thiele, “Storm Boy”. p.75.
"All right", he said. "I’m ready to go now if you like."

"Go? Where to?"

"To school! Like the sailors said."

His life till now has been an unreal idyll in a world where “there will always be men who are cruel, just as there will always be men who are lazy or stupid or wise or kind.” He leaves for school in the city, taking on the responsibilities of maturity and civilisation. The old sources of knowledge are inadequate in a complex and sometimes brutal world.

In Eleanor Spence’s *The October Child* (1986) the Mariner family live in a small coastal village, Chapel Rocks, which is the epitome of small-town dreariness: nothing much happens, nothing is accomplished. The oldest brother Kenneth is mad on surfing, interested in nothing else, and selfishly takes no responsibility for his autistic youngest brother Carl. The novel depicts enjoyment of the beach only once, and it also happens to be the only time Kenneth and the middle brother Douglas share an experience:

> Moonlight polished the underside of each wave to glittering silver, and drops of spray sparkled like ornaments on a Christmas-tree... Douglas stared at the unfathomable reaches of the sky; each rising wave lifted him gently to the stars, and when he was dropped down again they seemed to slide with him, like thousands of tiny iridescent fish in an enormous tank... 

But suddenly a shark appears, and the moment is cut short: indulgence in aimless enjoyment is dangerous, to be rejected – “I’m not going swimming in the dark any more.” Douglas also fears the Devil Hole, the Place where the sea surges and sucks back from the cliffs: a life of pleasure threatens to draw one into a destructive, mindless void.

The family moves to the city to seek education and treatment for Carl. Douglas is able to go to music school, and Adrienne enjoys her new school and its multicultural population. Only Kenneth, the unregenerate surfer, resists the attractions of the city and joins a hippie-like sect with vague plans of starting a commune up the coast, leaving the family to cope with Carl. Trying to make some sense of the tragedy of

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Carl, Douglas reflects that “if it hadn’t been for him, we’d never have left Chapel Rocks. And I wouldn’t have gone to the Music College and met all my friends.”

In a collection of papers presented at a recent conference on Australian children’s writing, Heather Scutter confesses that “I was surprised, coming back to the two older texts of Thiele and Spence, to find such a strong movement away, repudiation even, of the sea and the coast”. The fear of the beach’s seductive lure is not confined to “older texts”. In At Ardilla (1991) children from two families sharing a beach holiday house re-establish their claim to Ardilla every summer through secret rituals and chants. Their bonds are disrupted by the intrusion of a third family whom Jen resents, desperately resisting change and alienating herself from the newcomers and the more accommodating former members of the Gang. In her desire to hang onto the rites and totems of her childhood Jen behaves irrationally, endangering her life and that of the youngest child. While she returns to reality in the end, tragedy is only narrowly averted.

Perhaps the most revealing evidence of current negative attitudes to the beach in writing for children lies in critical and/or academic responses to the Lockie Leonard series of books by Tim Winton. In the first book, Lockie Leonard, Human Torpedo (1990), Lockie often experiences, while riding his surfboard, Dinnerstein’s “…joy of a creature who…has become familiar with striving and with the ebb and flow, the melting together and drawing apart…[who] surrenders itself to the melting, flowing moment…” When Lockie expresses this joy, it is in the crass language of a thirteen-year-old boy, rather than Dinnerstein’s elegant prose:

And then came this great green thing hissing out of nowhere and Lockie knew he’d either ride it or drink it…[he] felt it power him out forward as though he’d been shot from a cannon. He went screaming down the face.

Aaaaaaaarrrgh!… He crouched to save his knees breaking and the whole world went green as the inside of a cave… He held on and it kept curling across in front of him and above him until he thought it was getting to be a dream. And then he shot out the end into the light and let out another hoot before working the rest of the diminishing wave all the way into the beach. He fell to his knees on the sand and yelled: ‘Thank yoooooooooou!’

48 Spence, October Child, p.150.
49 Scutter, “Escaping the Landscape”, p.39.
No one had seen it, not a soul, and he couldn’t care less.  

Within the constraints of his to-be-expected limitations, Lockie is trying to express the emotion identified by Dinnerstein; but Scutter finds it “all rather grandiose”, dismissing it as “a boy’s idyll which doesn’t truly place the sacred within the frame of the mundane.”  

More criticism is directed towards thirteen-year-old Lockie’s resistance to growing up too soon: “Rousseau has his day again...pure latterday Romanticism” is Scutter’s comment. With respect to Lockie’s rejection of Vicki Streeton’s sexual advances, critic Richard Rossiter concludes that: “[The] resolution is achieved through reversion to childhood, and a repression of the libidinal instincts.” At least Scutter recognises that Winton perceives surfing as “expression rather than repression”, but she agrees with Rossiter in seeing it as linked to advocacy of delaying sexual activity. Winton admits to a strong autobiographical element in the Lockie Leonard books and is cheerfully unrepentant about Lockie’s values: “[I] spent most of my teenage years trying not to grow up too fast... it’s a grossly moralistic book, it’s painfully moralistic.” His readers seem not to mind: the Lockie Leonard books are very popular. Presumably Winton believes that where a child is not too anxious to “grow up too fast”, more can be learnt along the way. In Lockie Leonard, Legend, (1997) Lockie achieves a greater understanding of the reasons for Vicki’s “acting-out” behaviour of the year before, and they become friends again, partly because of their shared experience of unhappiness (his mother’s depressive illness, her brother’s incurable psychosis). But a moralising children’s writer is apparently to be condemned – except, perhaps, where issues of racism, sexism and the environment are concerned.

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52 Scutter, “Escaping the Landscape”, p.40.  
55 Scutter, “Escaping the Landscape”, p.40.  
57 Personal communication, children’s librarians.
Another presenter at the *Landscape and Identity* conference dismissed beach writing for children in two sentences. In the first, he lumps the beach with agricultural landscape as functioning to make city and country contrasts. And he concludes:

A comparison, obviously, of Lester’s *Magic Beach*, Graham’s *Greetings From Sandy Beach* and Crew and Rogers’ *Lucy’s Bay* will disclose almost everything there is to know about beachscapes.\(^5\)

In the *Oxford Companion to Australian Children’s Literature* the entry under “The Beach” takes up about a quarter of a column, and the editors comment that “the surf and surfing culture is noticeably absent from contemporary settings, and reflects the cautious approach of writers for adolescents.”\(^5\) One would like to press the authors further on this point: cautious of what? And why?

It seems that more evidence is found to support Dutton’s view that the beach has a “bad literary image” in the field of writing for children than in any other form of literature.

**Beach poetry**

The bush, rather than the beach, has been the primary source of imagery from nature for most of our poets. Among the best-known and widely read Australian poets - Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall, John Shaw Neilson, Christopher Brennan, James McAuley, Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, Les Murray and so on - none is primarily celebrated for beach poems. Judith Wright’s “The Surfer” is a fine poem, but is not one of her best-known works. However, some contemporary poets of considerable reputation mine a rich lode of meaning from their experiences of the beach. One who readily comes to mind is John Blight, whose more than fifty-year output of poetry is noted for its originality and its frequent use of beach imagery, particularly in *A Beachcomber’s Diary* (1963), *My Beachcombing Days* (1968), and *Holiday Sea Sonnets* (1985). Titles chosen at random - The Rocks”, “Cormorants”, “The

\(^5\) John Stephens, “Illustrating the Landscape in Australian Children’s Picture Books”, *Landscape and Identity*, p.76. *Greetings from Sandy Beach* is looked at in the next chapter.

Jellyfish”, “Porpoises”, “Crab”, “The Dead Shearwater” “Mullet in a Wave” - suggest that all the detail of marine life is grist to Blight’s mill; another, “The Mindless Ocean”, provides a further clue to its function in his poetry:

the vast
mindlessness of ocean confronts us with
unknown destinations...  

For Blight, the sea, including the beach, serves as a source of poetic inspiration. It has no meaning (is “mindless”) in itself, but is richly available for the projection of human thoughts and emotions. In “His Best Poems Are About the Sea” he scornfully rejects the label of beach poet and the vulgarity and commercialism which has corrupted what was formerly natural:

it finished their writing when we dirtied the surf
like the lace of a harlot’s panties; besides which
I am too old to advantage myself of its beauty
which I find now synthetic with the purchase
of sand for its far-famed beaches, at approximately
a dollar a grain... and those kids constantly
riding the surf - the surfies off the headlands
where the great grey-nurses paraded and even
seasonal whales.

All now has the beauty
and flatness of my neighbour’s swimming pool
which is blue.

Blue, pure and beautiful!
Blue skies of the tourist brochure. I am beginning
to loathe that colour with its aura of beauty contests:
seeing the winners, knowing their fuck is not far away.  

Blight will have no truck with the trendy popularity of the beach, choosing instead to “pursue concreteness”... to wrest his metaphors from his own idiosyncratic observations of the sea, discovering humour and glum stolidity:

I watch the largest body on
Earth wobbling, yet with rhythms of
tides. So much jollity here,
that the rocks I sit upon lack.

I take enjoyment from the tumble
of waves along shorelines so
expansive an orderly pattern
of poetry's discernible;
whereas the rocks at my feet
are an image of misanthropy.
No happiness accompanied
their fierce genesis here, but
pressures. I relax by the
sea, fleshed upon Earth's skeleton.⁶³

- and acknowledging, in "From the Inland", the utility of the surf for his poetic purposes:

Since these months, I have not seen the ocean, its clear
thought of flowing, the clean flash of sea,
keen, steel glint of saltwater, dear
is the memory. I cannot be
fond of this landscape of hard shapes.
the never-ending change of matter. Give
me a paddock of surf, where daisies drape
wave-crest and trough, though such blossoms live
in impressions only of white foam and gold suns
- the countless golden suns. the white daisy-foam,
where the greensward of ocean runs
up to a beach shanty some sailor calls home.
Here, in this continent's inland, this shed is a shed.
Where there is no dream, all fondness is dead.⁶⁴

Despite his grumble about "this landscape of hard shapes", Blight finds inspiration for poetry in the countryside, in the city, in Asia, in people, the intimate and the domestic, as well as in the things and creatures of beach and ocean. Blight continually focuses on different individual items to build up a knowledge of the universe and the place in it of human beings. The sea sonnets are not really about the sea, but about the interrelatedness of items of existence. As Judith Wright has noted,

his poems are, in the end, neither about nature and the sea, nor
about man, but about the primal puzzle, the relationship of the two
- of thought to world, of man to earth.⁶⁵

Blight's beach images are not derived from one particular locale. In contrast, although his poems range widely in tone, topic and substance, Bruce Beaver's poetry

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⁶⁴Blight "From the Inland", Selected Poems, p.62.
⁶⁵Wright, Preoccupations, p.213.
most frequently connects with Manly, its beach and its suburban streets. In “The Poems” he declares that poems must be derived from the poet’s own environment, discovered and woven out of the fabric of one’s time and place. The poem is both a love song to and a mapping of Manly, from the shoreline of the beach, to Queenscliff, past the lagoon, the pines, Fairy Bower, the hill beyond, the streets, the oval, the harbour, the wharf...

The real poems
were everywhere else
than within me
and I would have to
got there somehow,
got into
the world of selves
and singular poems
of the multiple
self of selves...

His life, and that of his family, is inextricably bound up with Manly, and it is there that he must find his poetry:

My grandparents owned this house
And I grew up nearby it in a haze
of rooms and board...
on the lawn near the kitchen steps in my
father’s arms when one month old...
I played beneath and in their branches,
Hid under steamy hydrangea bushes...

Here he is destined to endure and make sense of his world

Old house,
I’ll shelter here within reach
of the past and try again to learn
how to accept a mutable world and grow
as sane as I can in sight and sound
of the endless, ageless ocean...

To “grow as sane as I can” is more of a challenge to Beaver than to most, enduring as he does a mood-altering mental illness, the cause of suffering which he chronicles in

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some of his poems and of which he often finds echoes in his environment. He
describes the changes wrought by a blustery southerly at the end of a hot day:

Soft misty rain and a drop of thirty degrees.
The need for heat again, of warm clothes...
I'd sooner the cool than the heat that threw me
into the mad contending ring
of blood heat and aberrant rage
against the essence of this life.
Anger's washed out again.
bleached to a tic of pale remorse.
If there's a tide recessional
within me, there's a rising tide
down there at the shore...

There is reassurance in the endurance of the trees lining the beach:

Though the pines by the shore are thinned
of foliage and some of their branches are dying
the trees aren't going to lie down
to the rhetoric of wind and rain
or the moralizing of the waves
now or in the immediate, doubtless
from time to time stormy, future.

Endurance does not mean peace, however. Beaver recognises that

I understand only the man
who is at war within himself.

and the ambivalence that such a state entails is explored in one of his major poems,
Seawall and Shoreline. This is a poem about the search for meaning, connections,
about the journey through life, childhood, youth, finding the self; a poem which
wrings intensity from the metaphors of seawall - with its "unexpected change and
battling tides" - and shoreline, its ambiguity reflecting the poet's contradictory urges
- to participate and to withdraw:

Two bells tolling:
the bell within the streets
Between the ocean and the harbour's shore
Is shaken in the sun and calls Belong

Belong! while from the cliff-top clangs Begone!

Two births to bear with and experience
Within the confines of an island life;
One like a sea-birth, out of limpid ignorance;
the other terrible to contemplate
Out of earth’s unrest, seeking innocence...

Walking along the shoreline symbolises one’s journey through life and time, while the crumbling of the seawall signals change and decay:

Order is broken for me watching here
From the pocked and crumbling seawall, finding myself
Lost and at odds amid familiar sightings...

Yet the journey itself, the Odyssey, is its own purpose and provides a kind of healing—“This air has hurt and salved me”. The very sense of one’s (in)significance in the face of nature’s vast indifference brings about an acceptance and a receptivity which is close to peace. So Beaver can find, despite the turbulence of his life, hope of equanimity in the here and now:

...End the tyranny of history,
that shambles of old blood and bones.
Learn at least how to live and die
without the fear of longevity’s
objectiveless freedom.
without the hope
of an eternal adolescence
the task is to survive the outer
lure of the bonfire’s martyr, the inner
holocaust of consciousness.
To turn the entire being
into a veteran of the natural agon
whipping us into life between
a birth and a death...

In middle life I look towards this
balanced being who may greet
across the shining sands of years
a child among the tide line’s rubble
and the empty, ocean-hymning shells.

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73 Beaver “Seawall and Shoreline IV”, New and Selected Poems, p.32.
Another poet who has recently found the coastline with its beaches, sand and rocks to be “a rich source of imagery, [provoking] me to wonder whether, when my turn comes, I will exit as I lived, sinking or swimming” 75 is Andrew Taylor, in whose recent book of poems, *Sandstone*, the title poem, of 37 sonnets, comprises more than half of the content. Like Beaver, Taylor finds in the shorelines of beaches a way of exploring the large questions of time, place and human existence:

Maybe our life is an affair of coastlines
of touching on contours, of sand shifting underfoot, of footprints straying
a shoreline. No epitaph in granite
no marble eminence, no limestone
subtlety. Tracking my prints back
is recovering tides’ clean sweep
the cleansing services of storms’ and winds’
abrasive erasures. The only line
that matters in the end is forward
since home is what we find when we find
what it is, they say. Still, standing on the edge
of stone seven thousand kilometres wide
my back to a whole past vivid to my eyes
I wonder why, here, it should suddenly begin. 76

More recently, John Forbes’ poetry contains frequent references to the beach (amongst those to contemporary politics, ecology and the environment, drugs, cigarettes, alcohol and love). The beach has affected our perspectives, our very sense of our physical selves, as illustrated in “To the Bobbydazzlers”, a “Homage to American Poets”:

Sitting
on the beach I
look towards you
but the curve of the Pacific
gets in the way... 77

and “Breakfast – for Ronald and Julie Allan”:

...air and blood
flowing inside us
like currents that

76 Taylor, “Sandstone 35”, Sandstone, p.83. Other sonnets in the *Sandstone* sequence illustrate ideas developed in the next chapter, and will be presented and discussed there.
travel up & down the coast. The beaches shift around & we go after them as though swimming & golf are what we're 'made for'...

Of special interest is “On the Beach: a Bicentennial Poem”. Longer than most of his poems, its title suggests a “taking stock”, a review of where the nation stands after two hundred years. In the first section he writes of “your vocation”, referring both to himself as poet and to the nation’s sense of purpose or mission; but he sees the sense of vocation being distorted by pressure to do what others expect you to do, despite the distractions of apprehensions of sensuality (“the shape of lips”) and of the power and beauty - debased though it is by advertising - of the natural world:

... a block cut from the ocean with gradually deeper shades of blue as you trace down the seabed... ... ephemera sells you this image of Australia ...flogged and true-blue...

The presence of these forces makes commitment to purpose seem something driven by the imperatives of others, slightly ridiculous and unnatural:

... something you did for a bet & now regret, like a man walking the length of the bar on his hands balancing a drink on his shoe.

In the second section Forbes alludes to Australia’s irreligious culture in an oblique reference to Les Murray’s “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow”, a poem which tells of a man, a Christ-figure, weeping in Martin Place. In Forbes’ version a man beheads a chicken in Martin Place and people bet on the number of its gyrations. Forbes suggests that this image is closer to reality (beheading a chook for Christmas dinner being a time-honoured Australian ritual) than Murray’s vision of a Christ figure in the marketplace.

The poet addresses the Aboriginal people in the third section, ironically chides them for their lack of respect for the dignity of the British navy, and predicts that their oppression will continue:

... what they gave you when they took your land
is just a foretaste of what you’ll get
now your religious imagery looks subtle on a fabric.
Next week I’ll do the convicts...

A cliché about the convicts leads into the fourth section, where images of the past are seen as all equally empty and useless, “holiday snaps”, legends which either falsify the past or tell us nothing about ourselves. In the fifth section, the forms imposed by our founding culture are seen as ridiculous, “feathers in my hat & my good striped pantaloons”. We cannot sustain pomp and ceremony: a “back-yard vegetable bed bordered by upturned bottles” is a truer representation of our national style than an ADC “holding a pose”; and after all,

what model of Australia as a nation
could match the ocean...

In the final section, Forbes sees us as explorers still, rejecting the forms and ceremonies of older cultures, realising that connection to the natural world remains essential to us and that this connection will shape what is gradually to emerge, rather than us controlling, forging (through the power of technology) or moulding, through any other means, our future:

Instead a bay surrounds you
Like a gentle abrasive with something in it
That slowly sculpts your face –

You notice
Each figure as it emerges,
Empty as you imagined but expectant
With a blank, cut-up sense
Of what your vocation is going to be...

You, the nation – and the poet – will undergo a process, a becoming, lacking absolutes or hard-edged definition,

Glimpsed in the light
Coming through the half-open shutters
In the lounge bar of the Coogee Bay Hotel
Where you first dreamt up
This model of the Ocean
& watched it slide, slowly at first,
down the beach and into the surf. 79

Poetry is the most likely form of literature to manifest early evidence of stirrings within the individual or cultural imagination. David McCooey has written in a review of recently published poetry that "these collections show us (if we still needed to be shown) that the Australian imagination has come to terms with its coastal situation. The desert ecology...has been replaced by the similarly hardy, clinging ecology of the sea-coast". 80 For anyone interested in extending the work done in this investigation, contemporary and future poetry should prove an illuminating source of relevant material.

The foregrounding of nature, including the beach

Robert Drewe has probably been more responsible for stimulating recent interest in the meaning of the beach than any other writer, with the publication of The Bodysurfers and subsequent comments, his suggestion that "many, if not most, Australians have their first sexual experience on the coast" being perhaps the best-publicised. He emphasises the "intuitive and sensual appreciation of the coast felt by the world’s great beachgoers, the Australians"; and there is a sense in which sexuality pervades many of the stories in The Bodysurfers, notably the title story, "Body Oil", but also in "View from the Sandhills", "80% Humidity", and "The Silver Medallist" (1983). 83

But Drewe is not limited by this association, as has been shown in relation to "The Manageress and the Mirage". It is a characteristic of many of his beach stories that the natural world, including the beach, is accorded a prominence that advances it from background to or reflection of human experience to a role almost of agent,
protagonist, or counterpoint to the shifting, unstable lives of his characters. In “Radiant Heat” (1989), there is a skilful interweaving of the edginess of modern family life with the unpredictability of the natural world. It opens with a radio report of the drowning of two small boys in a beach lagoon. They are the same age as the narrator’s children, who are spending an “access” week with him and his new wife. They had moved to the coast to escape “from city real estate prices as much as other tensions”. But the new environment brings its own sense of menace, in nature: heat, bushfires, invasions of Bogong moths, which shower red pollen from the bottlebrushes on his son’s head. The fierce hot wind brings clouds of bushfire smoke, and

the bloodwoods and peppermints and angophoras were peeling and shedding fast in the wind, dropping sheets of bark, changing their colour and shape... On rare days things come together: heat, a moth plague, fires, crowds of people. When random factors combine you anticipate more things happening.

They drive to the beach to escape the bushfire.

Everyone seemed to have the same idea. Dead moths littered the high-tide line, moths and bluebottles that had been washed ashore...
“What’s that red stuff in Peter’s hair?” Jenna said.
“Pollen”, I said. “From the moths”.
“It’ll wash off in the sea”, Lucy said.

Even though the beach provides sanctuary from the fires, and the blood-red pollen will “wash off in the sea”, reminders of nature’s destructive power, in the smoky wind, dead moths and bluebottles, the “rotting smell from a pile of dead shags”, are inescapable.

Various commentators have drawn attention to the prominence accorded the Australian landscape in fictional writing. Coe notes its ubiquity in Australian autobiographical writing:

Of the ‘magical’ quality of the Australian landscape, the evidence is

87 Drewe, “Radiant Heat”, p.25.
overwhelming: not one single Childhood escapes from its influence.\textsuperscript{88}  

Gibson acknowledges that "the land looms large in white Australian culture"\textsuperscript{89}; George Johnston argues that "nothing human has yet happened in Australia which stands out above the continent itself"\textsuperscript{90}, and Les Murray takes this idea a step further:

It is even possible that the novel as a form we have adopted from elsewhere, may not be the best or only form which extended prose fiction here requires. Its heavy emphasis on the human, on character and the development of character, may tend to lead us into repeated misrepresentation of our world. Man and his classes and disputes may not be important enough, here, to sustain such a form. So many of our novels are portentous in essence, piling up sensibility and brilliance on themes which cannot quite bear them, trying to exclude space in order to attain intensity... there is something anti-ecological about the novel: in its assigning of all agency to humans, it may be seen as a product of the overhumanised landscapes of the old world...\textsuperscript{91}

This is thought-provoking in the way that Murray's arguments often are; a greater "foregrounding" of the non-human world indeed be seems to be characteristic of Australian as compared with European literature. In Soundings\textsuperscript{92}, a novel by Liam Davison, however, the human characters are so backgrounded, only one element in the past and present environment of Westernport Bay, that it is hard to sustain interest. More successful works have human beings, their behaviour and their relationships, as their primary concern, while recognising the power of the landscape, as in Bombora:

...this country does not forget itself, despite the deadening layers of tar, the hiding buildings, the heavy howl of traffic. It can make itself heard, and you will always remember that it is there. You can spend all day in the liquid cold air of an office and then step out into a heat so strong it will carry you home without your feet even touching the ground. You can hear the cicadas in the city, and see the twin gleam of a possum's eyes in the parks at night. And you can lie in the surf, you can be rolled and licked and loved by the water, the same water that has been cooling the sides of this hot island forever.\textsuperscript{93}

As the landscape thrusts itself into the heart of the city, so the beach cannot be forgotten when one travels inland:

\textsuperscript{88} Coe, "Portrait of the Artist", p.134.  
\textsuperscript{89}Gibson, \textit{South of the West}, p.xii.  
\textsuperscript{90}George Johnston, quoted in Tacey, \textit{Edge of the Sacred}, p.7.  
\textsuperscript{91}Murray, "Eric Rolls", pp.166-167.  
\textsuperscript{92}Liam Davison, \textit{Soundings}, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993.  
\textsuperscript{93}Bennett, \textit{Bombora}, pp.6-7.
We have two words for desert - dead heart and inland sea.  

Reminders of the ancient seabed which once lay over the interior are constantly encountered by the traveller. Waves whipped up by the westerly winds crash onto the eastern shore of the Menindee Lakes or Lake Eyre in a wet season. The pure sand forming the dunes of the “Walls of China” in Mungo National Park is identical to that found on coastal beaches, and once formed the shore of a vast lake. The razor-sharp ramparts of the Napier Range were once a coral reef growing towards the sunlight in a prehistoric sea. The inland view extends to a low flat horizon and light floods the infinite vault of the sky, as when one stands on the beach looking out to sea. The title of an early novel by Catherine Martin, The Silent Sea, refers to the saltbush plains between the sea and the desert country in South Australia.

Robert Drewe wrote that “When Australians run away, they always run to the coast”95, but in Thomas Keneally’s Woman of the Inner Sea Kate leaves the beach, “her garden and her age of innocence”96 and travels to the “inner sea”, inland, to shrink herself of the guilt of blame for the death of her two children. Her sins are washed away in the flood that inundates the floodprone western town where “the earth had once been a seabed”.97

Echoing A.D. Hope’s description of Australia

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a futile heart within a fair periphery
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Keneally wrote that “Australia is periphery. It dreams of and yet abandons the core.”98 Yet Keneally himself in this novel moves between core and periphery, exploiting their similarities and their connections.

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97 Keneally, Woman of the Inner Sea, p.205.
98 Keneally, Woman of the Inner Sea, p.189.
The writing of Tim Winton

Boundaries

The West Australian Tim Winton has joined Robert Drewe as a writer whose work is closely associated with the beach, especially since the publication of *Land's Edge* in 1995 and following interviews where he makes clear the importance of the West Australian coast in his life and in his art. Yet too literal a focus on the beach obscures what is a more fundamental characteristic of Winton’s writing: the way it constantly crosses and re-crosses boundaries - between land and sea, city and bush, shallows and depths, the past and the present, life and death, the natural and the supernatural. Winton asserts that “I think if we accept boundaries then we’re suckers - boundaries other people set for us” and “I feel this is true realism: the supernatural and the natural accepted as one thing, as inclusive.” This awareness of boundaries, and the implications of crossing or disregarding them, are keys to interpretation of Winton’s often difficult fiction.

In his early novel *An Open Swimmer*, the young protagonist Jerra is burdened with overwhelming guilt over his illicit relationship with “Aunt” Jewel, mother of Sean, his former mate from whom he feels increasingly alienated. Jerra has dropped out of university and is incapable of making choices about his future. He hates the city: it is synonymous with filth, corruption and aggression:

Papers and cans rolled along the tacky bitumen. Seagulls scrabbled over a pizza, picking at the vomity stuff, pulling it out of each other’s beaks...
Jerra met eyes he knew, letting them blink by, clacking up the footpaths amidst the stink of rotting flowers, fluorescent windows of scaled, headless fish, the chatter of money in tills, on bars, in pockets, gutters.

Jerra escapes to the bush, first with Sean, later on his own, but it is almost as unwelcoming as the city:

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100Richard Rossiter, “In his Own Words: the Life and Times of Tim Winton”, in *Reading Tim Winton*, p.10.
Bitter smoke seeped into the van, clouding the windows... [he could] 
see the shadows of the bitching trees, contorted in the moonlight... 
Sour ash had sunk into the earth under the dew.  

The only time Jerra becomes purposeful is when he goes diving off the rocks and around the wreck of a fishing boat. He is searching for meaning, for a way to throw off his oppressive guilt and to recapture a less troubled past, symbolised by his quest for a pearl that his father told him is found in the head of a kingfish; but his diving only leads to more troubled dreams and self-disgust as the violence within him leads to his senseless mutilation of a beautiful big fish. The old man living as a hermit near the beach, whose life in many ways echoes Jerra’s, tells him there is no jewel in the head of a “cave fish”, only in the “open swimmers”, fish who see the light as well as the depths. In the end, irrespective of his hostility to the city and attraction to the depths of the sea, Jerra is at home nowhere; his sense of identity becomes more and more fluid, shifting, “wobbly and unclear, like images underwater”. The novel ends in disintegration and destruction: the old man dies, caught in his own trap, and Jerra sets his van on fire.

On the first page of *Shallows*, Queenie Cookson tells of a dream which recurs “over and over”, at the time of the year when the whales pass close to the coastline:

from down in the bay came this thunderous splash and the whole farm shook and in the moonlight I saw this glistening, black...whale inching up towards the house.

Queenie hazards no guess as to the significance of this dream; but it becomes reality in the closing paragraph of the novel, where Queenie and Cleve, for the moment united and at peace with each other, hear the sounds of the whales and join them in their grounding:

‘They’ve come,’ Queenie whispered.

‘Yes.’ Cleve hugged her.

...[they] ran down the wet sand in the rain and shone the torch and saw the huge, stricken bodies lurching in the shallows. Queenie screamed. Surf

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thundered and the night was images in torch beams. Masses of flesh and barnacles covered the sand, creeping up, floundering, suffocating under their own weight. A pink vapour from spiracles descended upon Cleve and Queenie Cookson as they moved between the heaving monuments.  

While the significance of the whales' grounding is open to various interpretations, it is clear that they transgress the boundaries between sea and land, reflecting disturbance in the town of Angelus as the anti-whaling demonstrators disrupt the lives of its inhabitants. As the whales crash into the shallows, so Queenie and Cleve descend to the depths emotionally: Queenie by turning her back on the community where she grew up and throwing in her lot with the demonstrators, Cleve by sinking to the state of a down-and-out derelict.

Winton also recognises no barriers between the material and spiritual world:

...this is the kind of world where pigs speak in tongues and angels come and go. And I'm not speaking metaphor here. The world is a weird place.  

In That Eye, the Sky "the spiritual element is accepted as a given - a naturally occurring part of Winton's unusual fictional world". For Ort, the present reality and the spirit world overlap and merge. He dreams of a light which fills the house, becomes a ball and enters his father's throat, prefiguring the miracle at the end of the novel where grace enters the house, his Grammar is led gently out of this life by the spirit world, and his father begins to wake from his coma.

In Cloudstreet the pig talks and Quick Lamb glows like a light bulb for days when he returns to Cloudstreet after working in the wheatfields. One episode is a recapitulation of the Gospel story of the apostles casting out their nets in the Sea of Galilee and pulling in fish until their nets were "near to breaking"; surrounded by fish in the boat, Quick sees the black man, the Christ- or angel-figure who reappears at various times in the novel, seemingly walking on water. No happening is too strange to be taken for granted in Cloudstreet.

105 Winton, Shallows, p.260.
Fish Lamb is especially attuned to the intuitive and the spiritual, even though he is seemingly blind and deaf to his mother. When he was a bright and captivating little boy, Fish was rescued by his family from drowning the instant before he reached the bright world beyond:

It's like Fish is stuck somewhere. Not the way all the living are stuck in time and space: he's in another stuckness altogether. Like he's half in and half out. You can only imagine and still fail to grab at how it must be.\(^{708}\)

Henceforth in a state of suspension between life and death, Fish is a blessing as well as a tragedy to his family, striving always to return to the world of light that he so nearly attained, achieving his goal in the joyous dive which begins and ends the story:

A flicker, then a burst of consciousness on his shooting way, and he'll savour that healing all the rest of his journey, having felt it, having known the story for just a moment.\(^{109}\)

In the scene where Quick and Fish drift in a rowing boat beneath the stars, time and space are transcended: there is an "erasure of distinction between sky and earth, night, space and water: ‘Heaven’ is not divided from earth."\(^{110}\)

The relationship between the present and the past is also fluid and shifting in Winton's fiction. Many of his characters carry a burden from the past which complicates and distorts their present lives. We meet Jerra from *An Open Swimmer* again in several stories in the *Minimum of Two* collection.\(^{111}\) He is now married to Rachel and living in the city, apparently more "grounded" with respect both to place and a sense of his own identity:

He had come to love the city. It was no capitulation on his part; merely a gradual awareness of new beauties. He was older now, he felt it.\(^{112}\)

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\(^{107}\) Yvonne Miels "Singing the Great Creator: The Spiritual in Tim Winton's Novels", in *Reading Tim Winton*, p.32.


\(^{109}\) Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*, p.2.


\(^{111}\) We also meet Queenie and Cleve Cookson again in the short story "Laps". It is as though Winton's characters, like their author, disregard the boundaries between one piece of writing and another.

Nilsam was a father. He was a husband. He was a son.\footnote{Winton, “Gravity”, p.31.}

In “Nilsam’s Friend” he can look on an old friend, continuously travelling as a way of fleeing commitment - as he himself once did - as “the old romantic...the perpetual adolescent.”\footnote{Winton, “Nilsam’s Friend”, Minimum of Two, p.43.} The friend tells exotic tales while also admitting that “I wished you were there, sometimes, you and Rae and the Terror”.\footnote{Winton, “Nilsam’s Friend”, p.44.}


[\text{Jerra felt}] \text{overweight, sluggish, ignorant and still a little disdainful.}  
\text{He was working. He had a son to look after, and a wife to consider. He didn’t have the money or the hide. And, dammit, he didn’t want to go.}\footnote{Winton, “Nilsam’s Friend”, p.46.}

Yet later “he caught himself wondering what it was like to see the same creamy light, the same blue eye of the ocean, the same sky-colours somewhere else”.\footnote{Winton, “Bay of Angels”, Minimum of Two, p.91.}

In “Bay of Angels” Jerra is the strong one, supporting his friend whose life is disintegrating, helping him “stay afloat”, to “jettison the cargo” of the past.\footnote{Winton, “The Strong One”, Minimum of Two, p.98-99.} But in “The Strong One” Rachel takes over this role, with Jerra as the one who needs to let go of the past:

\text{She couldn’t understand Jerra’s attitude towards them [his parents]. She knew there’d been problems when he was younger, but it was so long ago. Jerra seemed to bear weights from the past as though they were treasures he had to take with him. It made no sense. She’d had to jettison more than he had to stay afloat...lately she’d come to suspect he enjoyed bearing it all, as though the past, as well as being his source of pain, might also be his only source of comfort.}\footnote{Winton, “More”, Minimum of Two, p.129.}

In the end, Jerra’s dying father offers him reconciliation and advice:

\text{You’ve done orright, Jerra. You grew up through some rough business. You’re not too proud yet to be guilty...You worry about the living. Like your mother says, ‘don’t be bitter, be better’.}\footnote{Winton, “More”, Minimum of Two, p.129.}
Jerra has come a long way, but it seems that his grip on the present and ability to let go of the past will always be fragile, precarious:

He felt her flesh cool beneath his palms. ‘I’m not dying. I’m living.’

...as he leant out to kiss her, the undergrowth exploded and shadows showered up in every direction.

He cried out in fear.

‘Quail,’ Rachel said.

In the silence he heard the blood beating at his throat.\(^{121}\)

Boundaries are important in Winton’s fiction. They are associated with the divide between realms of different emotional or spiritual significance, as in *An Open Swimmer* and *Shallows*; ambivalences to be resolved, as in “Gravity”; and categories to be ignored or limitations to be transcended, as in *Cloudstreet* and *That Eye, the Sky*.

**Verges and Edges**

…it’s pleasurable and quite useful to tell a story that’s on the verge of something, whether it be on the land or sea - or on a cliff - on the verge of air and land or with dawn and dusk it’s on the verge of night and day...it kind of feels full of tension for me...\(^{122}\)

One reviewer has written that “Tim Winton’s fictional world is one of edges and marginality”\(^{123}\), and this is particularly true of his short stories in both *Minimum of Two* and *Scission*. In the title story in *Minimum of Two* the narrator Madigan becomes obsessed with hatred because of the devastating effect of Fred Blakey’s rape on Madigan’s wife Greta, and goes “over the edge” to murder Blakey. In *Scission* some of the characters are catapulted into a new experience - of raw birth intruding into respectable suburbia (“Neighbours”); of death prefigured by the discovery of shoes on a beach (“A Measure of Eloquence”) or experienced directly (“The Woman at the Well”, “Wilderness”); others have a time-bomb ticking inside them, a state of

\(^{121}\)Winton, “More”, p.131.


emotional tension which explodes into violence or murder ("Secrets", "Scission"). In "Scission" the tension disintegrates into seeming chaos, as three stories - of Rosemary McCullough's life and marriage, of Ruth Phillips' cleaning up of Rosemary's flat after the funeral, and of McCullough's movements in the moment leading up to the shooting of his wife - are intercut in an apparently random sequence, reflecting the breakdown of the main characters' lives. 

Amid the "edginess" of so many of Winton's characters, there is one place and one activity where direction, resolve and purpose are found: in swimming in the sea. In "The Water was Dark and it went Forever Down" the young girl swims to heighten her sense of her own competence, of being free and streamlined, uncluttered by the past, different from her alcoholic, self-pitying mother.

Maybe that's why I started swimming, she thought, to stop her drowning me...

No, you old bitch. I can swim... I can swim away.

That body thrashed and whitened the water... and all the way down she felt young and strong and perfect in the cold darkness.

In "Bay of Angels" Jerra goes swimming with the friend from An Open Swimmer Sean, reflecting that "he'd [Sean] never been unable to continue the way a swimmer, cramped up and beaten, prepares to drown"; but this time it is different:

My friend laboured beside me. Sobered, I said 'We always come back to water. When things happen'.

I waited for my friend to tell me, but he stroked along, eyes shuttered against the sea... I sensed my friend tiring; his stroke was ragged.

In "The Strong One" Jerra is met by his mother with news of Sean's death in a car - accidental or intentional, we are not told. Sean's weakness while swimming is a sign of and presages his emotional, and eventually physical, disintegration.

125 Tim Winton, "The Water was Dark and it Went Forever Down", Minimum of Two, pp.38-39.
126 Winton, "Bay of Angels", pp.92-93.
In *Shallows*, Cleve watches Queenie swimming:

...it occurred to the man that his wife ought not to have been born a
land mammal... she was strong, lithe and quick in the water, and he
was sometimes afraid of her.\(^{127}\)

Cleve is weak, inept, without a strong sense of his own self and his own worth, in
contrast to Queenie, and this difference is captured in their different competence in
the water. Later the couple reappear in "Laps" in *Minimum of Two*. They had had to
leave Angelus after Queenie’s involvement in the anti-whaling campaign made her an
outcast; it took seven years for Queenie to

begin to swim seriously again... It took her seven years to find will
again, to shrug off defeat... with each swim she was shifting more than
her own weight.\(^{128}\)

As she becomes fitter, she feels strong enough to return and make her peace with her
home town and she and Cleve go back, taking with them their child Dot, who knows
nothing of the past and sees the new place with an innocent, fresh vision. They revisit
all the old places, apprehensive at recognition, but Queenie becomes a little peeved at
anonymity as "No one recognised her": her ostracism was in the past, life has moved
on, “she was just another tourist come to see wildflowers and replicas and plaster
whales".\(^{129}\)

Memory tugs strongest as they try to enter the property once owned by her
grandfather, now taken over by the odious Des Pustling; but as she defies the warning
against trespassing, returning to the beach where she met Cleve, where Dot was
conceived, and where the whales ran aground, it is Cleve who has the wisdom to
symbolically liberate them from the painful past:

‘This is a special place, Dot,’ she said, pulling up near the tidal smear of weed.

‘No,’ said Cleve. ‘It’s just a beach. Just a place.’
She looked at him a moment. ‘Yes. You’re right.’

She struck out swimming, not invincible but strong. And she knew

\(^{127}\) Winton, *Shallows*, p. 4.
\(^{128}\) Winton, "Laps", p. 75.
\(^{129}\) Winton, "Laps", p. 81.
she could swim it all out of her; it was only a matter of time.  

Swimming represents competence, strength, and a shedding of the burdens of the past.

The question of why it is almost always women who are associated with swimming in the works being discussed is an interesting one. It could simply be, as a cynic of my acquaintance asserts, that women are more at home in the water because the distribution of fat in their bodies makes it easier for them to withstand the cold. Evidence in support of this observation is implied in a verse in an article headed “Winter Waters at Manly”:

Oh woman! In our hours of care,
Uncertain, coy and hard to please;
When icy winds and chill waves tease,
Thy form is first to brave the seas.

But one senses a deeper reason than this! Research on dreams has indicated that women dream about swimming more than men do, suggesting that it carries more emotional significance for them. Sometimes it seems that to swim is to find “[a] room of one’s own”, a way of escaping an unhappy home (“The Water was Dark and it Went Forever Down”) or a difficult relationship (Rachel in The Chiming of Light). Then again, according to feminist theorists Nancy Chodorow (The Reproduction of Mothering) and Carol Gilligan (In a Different Voice) an important psychological difference between men and women is that autonomy is a key issue for men, relationship for women; so it could be argued that men are less at ease with immersion, unconsciously perceiving it as threatening the loss of their autonomy and separateness, whereas women experience while swimming a comfortable balance between awareness of the separate body and the surrounding medium, between being-at-one-with-the-environment and agency. Or perhaps men fear the sea as they fear being engulfed by Woman. Dinnerstein quotes Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex:

Woman is “night in the entrails of the earth. Man is frightened of this

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131 Anon., Daily Telegraph, 1 October 1906.
133 See page 180, following.
night, the reverse of fecundity, which threatens to swallow him up. [Yet] Embracing her, it is all the riches of life that the lover would possess. She is the whole fauna, the whole flora of the earth...the cool water of springs, air, flame, land and sea...Nothing lies deeper in the hearts of men than this animism. 134

Whatever the truth of these suggestions, characteristic differences between men and women as they swim in the ocean or beachside pool can be observed. Most women do not swim with the same urgency as men, and part of their swimming time will often be spent floating or deviating from straight-line swimming in a relaxed way. Many men seem to assert themselves in the water, swimming “flat out” and unswerving, so that others have to get out of their way - at least until age or infirmity slows them down. Many surfboard riders, who are mostly men, “attack” the wave, aggressively hacking through it rather than dancing with it. And bodysurfers, again mostly men, “surrender” (Quinn’s word), “yielding” to the wave for the sake of the thrilling speed and thrust they experience when they catch it (or it catches them). 135

Views as to the merit of Winton’s writing vary widely, ranging from those who are scathing about values seen as being expressed in his work to those who examine them from a deeper, poetic-dramatic perspective. 136 Brian Matthews judges the ending of Shallows to be “elusively unsatisfactory” 137; this is also true of An Open Swimmer, and of his most recent novel The Riders. It is as if the very openness of Winton’s imagination, his disregard of conventionally limited representations of reality, make it more difficult for him to achieve closure - although this is not true of That Eye the Sky or Cloudstreet, where a stronger supernatural element and an optimism about the resilience of his characters lead to a more positive and rounded-off resolution. Scenes of familial happiness like Rose and Quick’s wedding in Cloudstreet probably helped shape Scutter’s view of Winton as a “Dickensian sentimentalist”; and if it were not

134 Quoted in Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, pp.124-125.
135 A deeper investigation of these matters lies beyond the scope of the present study, but research into the burgeoning field of “women’s” writing could be illuminating.
137 Matthews, “Burning Bright”, p.87.
too incongruously English an image, in too incongruously Australian a scene, one
could almost imagine as one of the wedding guests an Australian version of Tiny Tim
from A Christmas Carol chirruping “God bless us all, every one!”

Cloudstreet was recently adapted for the theatre in a production which received
critical and popular acclaim. A writer could do worse than to be regarded as an
Australian version of Dickens. However, Cloudstreet is as different from An Open
Swimmer as it is from The Riders. It is too early for a definitive judgement on this
sometimes difficult and still-developing writer. With respect to the concerns of this
study, Winton’s interests are often expressed through subject matter unconnected to
the beach; but as will be argued in the next chapter, it is the features of his work
which have been discussed here which make him the quintessential example of a
writer who has been profoundly influenced by the beach experience.

Western Australia and beach writing

Discussion of Tim Winton’s writing prompts recognition that there is a strong
connection between writing about the beach and life in Western Australia. One of the
earliest novels to contain extensive descriptions of people at play on the beach and to
illuminate plot and character through imaginative and metaphorical treatment of the
beach was Intimate Strangers, by Katharine Susannah Prichard, whose married life
was spent in Western Australia. Winton and Robert Drewe are probably the best-
known and most influential contemporary writers on beach themes: Drewe grew up
and was educated on the West Australian coast, although since then he has lived
mainly in Sydney. For Andrew Taylor, the movement was in the other direction, from
east to west:

The coastline near Perth...reminded me of the sandstone cliffs and sandy beaches
of the Victorian coast I knew as a child and adolescent...My sequence of sonnets
is an attempt to relate what I am now - in the context of the coastline and ocean
beaches that I frequent today - to a childhood and adolescence in which the
beach in Victoria still seems to have been so important.138

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And Caroline Caddy, another West Australian poet, reveals a strong beach influence in poems in her collection *Beach Plastic*.

As Winton has pointed out, the West Australian coast is different from that of the east, and it shapes the lives and the attitudes of those who live there differently:

> Nowhere else on the continent is the sense of being trapped between sea and desert so strong... In many places along this vast and lonely coastline the beach is the only margin between them.  

The immensity of the Indian ocean is separated from the immensity of the interior by the narrowest of edges - the weight of those two great presences pressing on life along the margin and giving it a sense of fragility, precariousness:

> Those towns, many hundreds of kilometres apart, are the domain of the temporary dwelling... the landscape and the merciless weather, the irregular water, never gave white people a sense of the long term... Distance, waterlessness, relentless weather have made them taciturn.

Given (except in the southwest corner and the Kimberley coastline) the absence of the distracting features of landscape found in other parts of Australia - rainforest, mountains, gullies, foothills and slopes (even “the Outback” is an eastern concept: in Western Australia the Outback is right there), it is not surprising that the coastline, including the beaches, is a prominent influence on the arts coming out of the west. Certainly the creative contribution of Western Australia to the arts in Australia in recent times seems to be disproportionately to its population.

### Apprehensions of the numinous

In their treatment of the beach some writers express what Wordsworth would have called “intimations of immortality” and which might be discerned here as apprehensions of the numinous which derive from the archetypal nature of the beach.

A desire to hold onto the perfection of the moment has already been noted in relation to the love scenes in *Intimate Strangers* and *Clean Straw for Nothing*. Such moments

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140 Winton, *Land’s Edge*, p.46.
occur in works as dissimilar as David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*, Bill Green's *Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing*, and Kathleen Stewart's *Spilt Milk*.

At the end of *Fly Away Peter*, after the death in the first World War of Jim the birdwatcher, his friend Miss Harcourt, the elderly photographer of birds, makes her way down the soft sand of the dunes towards the beach.

High walls of water were suspended a moment, held glassily aloft, then hurled themselves forward under a shower of spindrift, a white rush that ran hissing to her boots...a still scene that was full of intense activity and endless change.

“What am I doing there?” she asked herself... “I am doing” she told herself firmly “what those gulls are doing. Those oystercatchers. Those terns.”

She sat on the beach now and watched the waves, one after another, as they rose, gathered themselves, stood poised a moment holding the sun at their crests, then toppled. There was a rhythm to it...Maybe she would go from birds to waves. They were as various and as difficult to catch at their one moment.

That was it, the thought she had been reaching for. Her mind gathered and held it...That is what life meant, a unique presence, and it was essential in every creature. To set anything above it, birth, position, talent even, was to deny to all but a few among the infinite millions what was common and real, and what was also, in the end, most moving. A life wasn't for anything. It simply was.

She watched the waves build, hang and fall, one after the other in decades, in centuries...

A youth was walking - no, running, on the water. Far out, a mere dot on the sunlit water, where the waves gathered and began, she saw him paddle again, them miraculously rise, and the whole performance was repeated: the balance, the still dancing on the surface, the brief etching of his body against the sky at the very moment, on the wave’s lip, when he would slide into its hollows and fall.

That, too, was an image she would hold in her mind.

...One day, soon, she might make a photograph of this new thing. To catch its moment, its brilliant balance up there, of movement and stillness, of tense energy and ease - that would be something.

This eager turning, for a moment, to the future, surprised and hurt her.

Dinnerstein expresses the hope that we will be able to overcome our mixed feelings about carnality, "to handle the prospect of the final separation without despising the body's simple wishes, without robbing the body of the poignant, cherished status that rightly belongs to loved and perishable things". It is fitting that Miss Harcourt feels the pain of loss in the memory of Jim's death at a moment of such heightened awareness of the fragility and the wonder of life.

_Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing_ is a very different work - an adolescent rites-of-passage novel set in a Victorian holiday resort where violence lurks among the dunes and in the soul of the narrator. He is crude and aggressive in the way of testosterone-soaked young males, but he describes a special moment when he and his girlfriend seek shelter from the threat of bushfires by going down onto the beach:

Gillian strode out too and dived through the surface of gold [the light from the bushfires is projected onto the surf by the setting sun]. The slap of her body hung in the air where she had disappeared. This is impossible, I thought. I've never even imagined the ocean this way. I wondered if I would ever lose the memory of it.

A more recent novel _Spilt Milk_ (1995) portrays alienation and isolation in the modern city through the main narrator, Sylvia. She lives in Kings Cross; her relationship with her husband Joe was poor, he has gone missing, and towards the end of the novel she discovers that he was murdered, knifed by a petty gangster at the Cross. Her reaction to this news is flat, as is her feeling about her daughter and only child Zoe. She had no great maternal feeling for Zoe, who was taken away, perhaps for that very reason, by her grandparents, the narrator's parents. She does not know where they have gone. She ekes out a living by housecleaning for a number of working women, all of whom are defiantly or desperately alone.

The narrator's prevailing mood is of indifference - the title pretty well sums it up. The only time she seems to be engaged, to react, is when she walks down to the beaches, Bondi or Bronte, to watch the sea - and this she does often. It is a feature of this late twentieth-century novel that its beach is a first-stage (nineteenth-century)

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142 Dinnerstein, _Mermaid and Minotaur_, p.156.
beach, a place from where a solitary observer contemplates the sea. But in an ironic commentary on late twentieth-century life, the lofty meditations of nineteenth-century writers on God, Eternity and the place of Man in the universe have been replaced by reference to the technological artifacts and commercial products which have taken the place of religion in the postmodern world:

The shock of the thick white foam! Like white mould, thick as candida, Omo-white.

The sea is like a washing-machine, relentless in its cycles. It is like a load of tumble-drying, rising and folding in upon itself, again and again.

The sea is pearly aqua, almost metallic. But still it furls and unfurls its waves; it is like the green froth in Dorothy’s toilet bowl.144

God has not disappeared altogether, however:

A new wave of colour rises from the sea...
God is alive, I feel, and trying to tell us something...

I stare at the sea. I do not see it. I am thinking of meaning...

After all this, love does not interest me. I am more interested in naming the shape of the sea...In examining the meaning of being, and of being free. I am more interested in being. There’s no future or past in being. It’s safer that way for me...

I get drenched in the rain and my dress clings. I taste the water, and I know I am alive, and that is the meaning. Water runs from my eyebrows, down my nose and onto my tongue, and that is the meaning; and the sea clatters against the cliffs that protect the city, and the city is a creature with shell upon shell, and every shell holds its lives, departing and returning, living and dying, and going who knows where, and that is the meaning.145

A very different kind of person, Sylvia’s conclusions in Spilt Milk are not a world away from Miss Harcourt’s in Fly Away Peter.

Retreat or “Time Out”

A sense of the beach as a place of retreat where one achieves a new perspective on human concerns, gains inner peace or re-establishes equilibrium after disturbance or

effort is a common theme of beach writing. When Sylvia in *Spilt Milk* is in a stage of “murderous rage”:

> There is only one thing for it. I head to the sea.

> At last I am there: the sea rushing itself against the rocks. I sit and watch. The sea boils; waves chum and dash and fling themselves at rocks. Below the surface flurry, the sea is cold. I watch until I am calmer, but not calm...

> It is peace, of a kind.\(^{146}\)

The turbulent adolescent in *Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing* is similarly affected:

> I walked from the dunes and into the ocean. It was wondrous; there was such strength in the waves. They hurled me about without effort, as if I hardly existed, and I was soon completely recovered [from an outburst of rage, during which he gratuitously attacked and destroyed trees growing behind the dunes]. I left the water knowing that people and the horrors they were carrying were ultimately nothing.\(^ {147}\)

In *Shallows*, the sight and sounds of the familiar town beach signify to Queenie the return to normality of the town of Angelus as the anti-whaling demonstrators leave and conflict and disruption ends:

> Queenie walked out onto the esplanade and saw gulls huddled on the beach where she had learnt to do the dead man’s float. Mothers with prams moved along the footpaths and small children screamed gleefully, rocketing up on trampolines. A cluster of truants’ bicycles, all fallen together like an obscure sculpture, glinted in a brief showing of sun. An old man fished with a long rod off the beach. Retired couples strolled along the beach picking up shells, pointed, held hands. A cormorant alighted on the roof of the public toilets.

> A baby cried... Two truanting girls compared winter tans on the lawn in the heatless sun. Queenie Cookson wanted very much to go down on the beach but after a few minutes of wistful observation she went back to the smoky hotel to pack.\(^ {148}\)

Release from daily imprisonment in the workplace is celebrated in “The Meatworks” by Robert Gray. The narrator of the poem works amidst the stench and squeals of terrified pigs in an abbatoir, reminders of the slaughter that takes place there remaining with him when the day’s work is done:

> after sticking your hands all day

\(^ {146}\)Stewart, *Spilt Milk*, pp.28-29.

\(^ {147}\)Green, *Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing*, p.10.

in snail-sheened flesh,
you found, around the nails, there was still blood.

But in the evening the narrator walks along the beach in company with his wife, its beauty and the cleansing ritual he is able to perform there redeeming him from the brutality of the day (alluded to in that word bruising):

I'd walk home on
the shiny, white-bruising beach, in mauve light,
past the town.
The beach, with those startling, storm-cloud mountains, high
beyond the furthest fibro houses, the reason
I stayed... My wife
carried her sandals, in the sand and beach grass,
to meet me. I'd scoop up shell-grit
and scrub my hands,
treading about
through the icy ledges of the surf
as she came along... 149.

Retreat to the beach is not only for the solitary and the contemplative. Robert Drewe writes that “the beach is ... a place where people go to examine an old relationship that is going through troubles, re-examine their lives, fix things up if they are fixable, or find the courage to go in a new direction.” In the title story from Helen Garner’s Postcards from Surfers collection, the narrator retreats from the disintegration of her affair with Phillip to spend time with her retired parents on the Gold Coast. Her depression and sense of nervous anticipation during the journey are subtly conveyed: “The swells are dotted with boardriders in black wetsuits, grim as sharks”. The history and the present state of her relationship with her father is revealed in random memories recalled as she writes to her (ex)lover Philip, through postcards which she covers with writing and eventually drops into a rubbish bin - a reluctant letting go of a relationship which is over. Thinking about Phillip intensifies her awareness of her problematic relationship with her father, whom the reader sees through her eyes - larger than life (the noise of his eating fills the room) 152, an authority (“Dew does not rise. It forms.”) 153, -skilled and knowledgeable at his craft of woolclassing (his “big

150 Drewe, “Tidal Pull”, p. 41.
152 Garner, “Postcards”, p. 3.
blunt hands...teased out the wool, judged it, classed it, assigned it a fineness and a destination: Italy, Switzerland, Japan"

A man more mysterious than he seems, "he stands on the edge of the grass, the edge of his property, looking at the sea..."

In *The Chiming of Light*, the companion novella to Tegan Bennett’s *Bombora*, the group of young student/unemployed inner-city dwelling friends live from day to day. Rachel and Frank seem to have simply drifted into a sexual relationship; the only time Rachel appears to focus on the nature of the relationship, where it is going, and tries to discuss it with Frank is when they go to Coogee, where Rachel swims in the rockpool as Frank reads or sunbakes:

‘Sometimes I’m not sure that you really want to be with me.’

Frank looked at her. ‘Wait a second. You’re kidding, aren’t you.’

Rachel smiled in spite of herself. ‘No, really. It’s just - God, I don’t know how to talk anymore! You’re not happy, or something. It’s like you’ve given up. I don’t understand it’...

‘Well, I haven’t changed.’ Frank considered the lie. The swell was rising. Wedding Cake Island - too far out to see movement - was a frozen turmoil of blue and thick white spray. ‘Okay, maybe I have. Maybe we have. Sleeping together, it makes everything different.’...

‘We’re about to have one of those relationship conversations,’ said Rachel. ‘I can’t believe it.’

They discuss their relationship as they never have before, but the conversation fizzes out as Rachel leaves to meet Vince.

Frank sat very still and stared at the island. Coogee moved silently behind his back. Hung time. The water and the sky swelled in his eyes and at the glittering, brittle edges of his mind he wondered what was happening...

On the next occasion Frank and Rachel go to the pool with Vince, their more emotionally needy friend whose girlfriend has left him. Vince swims with Rachel in the cold water of the pool, thoughts of his lost love and anxiety about the future flashing into his mind:

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155 Garner, “Postcards”, p.16.
A green opaque kingdom. Under the sea. He forced downwards, feet hitting cold air for a moment. Pushing, pushing, till his chest scraped seaweed and rock and the sky miles away above him... And up again, striking along the surface.

There was no explanation to be made, or none that would not give him away, make him feel exposed and defeated and nowhere. The slow build of frustration and disappointment. The growing feeling of panic. Nobody - least of all him - wanted to know that they could not stay where they were forever. The friendships fracturing naturally over the years. And the knowledge. that he was the weak link.\textsuperscript{157}

Rachel gathers resolve as she swims, in the manner of Winton’s swimming women, but it falters and dies before she returns to Frank:

Rachel picked her way back to Frank, hair streaming, feet leaving splattered prints on the bone-dry concrete. Her skin felt cold with intelligence and energy always after swimming, as though she could ruthlessly make decisions for the best. She would say, \textit{Let’s finish this.} Swallowing, however, she knew that the sun was too hot; soon her skin would be dry and before she had even spoken she would be left parched and uncertain.\textsuperscript{158}

In \textit{Away}, the scene on the beach is an important stage in the spiritual quest of the play’s characters. A magical storm (equivalent to that in \textit{King Lear}) in the previous scene having destroyed the material goods which were so important to Gwen, all the characters meet, stripped of possessions and pretensions, on a secluded beach (as the characters are reunited in \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} - \textit{Away} is rich in Shakespearean allusions). Here Gwen’s sadness and inability to let go of the past are recognised and forgiven; Harry tells of Tom’s fatal illness; and Coral is finally able to move forward from her son’s death in Vietnam. At the end of the play, the bonfire on the beach is a symbol of the purification wrought through suffering, understanding and forgiveness. The final stage instruction reads: “Beyond them, as in a dream, the lights play on the blue horizon and the sea”: the play ends as it evokes the archetypal associations of the beach in the hearts and minds of the audience.

Tim Winton has written that

\textsuperscript{157} Bennett, “The Chiming of Light”, p.190.
\textsuperscript{158} Bennett, “The Chiming of Light”, p.191.
Surfing, swimming laps, drifting a bait from the jetty or a boat are similarly [to diving] forgetful things. They are forms of desertion, retreat, hermitage, a stepping-aside from terrestrial problems to be absorbed in the long moment. The sea is immense, trackless, potent, but above all, neutral.\(^{159}\)

Winton’s neutrality, Blight’s “mindlessness of ocean”, Corbin’s “energy of concentrated emptiness”: embodying no suggestion of comment or judgment on human behaviour or motive, the beach provides a *breathing-space*, a place of temporary refuge. Drewe writes in his Introduction to *The Picador Book of the Beach* that in this international collection of beach stories “the vast majority are to do with escape”\(^{160}\), but this is not true of most Australian writing on the beach. While the beach can provide respite from the cares of the moment, or an opportunity for reappraisal of where one’s life is heading, re-entry to the everyday world is as accepted and taken for granted as is access to the beach itself.

**Destruction, violence and regression to the primitive**

Winton writes that

> for every moment the sea is peace and relief, there is another when it shivers and threatens to become chaos. It’s just as ready to claim as it is to offer.\(^{161}\)

In most Australian writing it is the sea in its benign aspect which predominates. Nevertheless, beachgoing is approached with

> a mixture of gusto and apprehension, for our sea is something to be reckoned with. We are reared on stories of shark attacks, broken necks from dumpings in the surf, and melanoma. I suspect we go because of these warnings at times, and not simply despite them.\(^{162}\)

Sometimes sharks are symbols of the sinister in the apparently commonplace - as in Bruce Beaver’s reference to

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\(^{159}\) Winton, *Land’s Edge*, p.31.

\(^{160}\) Introduction to *The Picador Book of the Beach*, p.4.

\(^{161}\) Winton, *Land’s Edge*, p.41.

the white, jagged rictus in the grey sliding anonymity,
faint blur of red through green,
the continually spreading stain.\(^{163}\)

In Robert Drewe's "Shark Logic" the narrator has left his family in Perth (who believe him dead) to live temporarily in a rented flat at Manly, perhaps to go on to make a new life in New Zealand. He notes

the spray that kills the Norfolk Pines on the oceanfront, a careless violent hedonism...the beach night-life, the coarse aimless lives...Sometimes I find discarded hypodermic needles in the sand...Surf and tides turn malign too suddenly, waves dump you, sandbanks crumble...undertows catch you unawares. I imagine they're [sharks] everywhere. In every kelp patch, in the lip of every breaker, I sense a shark.\(^{164}\)

A man in limbo, his old life destroyed, a new path not yet chosen, a sense of the potential for violence - of threat posed by the existential void in which he is suspended - is both projected onto and reflected back by the beach and its seedy surroundings.

In "The Surfer", Judith Wright also discerns the menace of "the grey-wolf sea" into which the joy-giving waves can be transformed in an instant:

He thrust his joy against the weight of the sea;  
climbed through, slid under those long banks of foam -  
(hawthorn hedges inspring, thorns in the face stinging)  
How his brown strength drove through the hollow and coil of green-through  
weirs of water!  
Muscle of arm thrust down long muscle of water  
and swimming so, went out of sight  
where mortal, masterful, frail, the gulls went wheeling  
in air as he in water, with delight.

Turn home, the sun goes down; swimmer, turn home.  
Last leaf of gold vanishes from the sea-curve.  
Take the big roller's shoulder, speed and swerve;  
come to the long beach home like a gull diving.

For on the sand the grey-wolf sea lies snarling  
cold twilight wind splits the waves' hair and shows  
the bones they worry in their wolf-teeth. O, wind blows  
and sea crunches on sand, fawning and mouthing;

\(^{163}\)Bruce Beaver, "Letters to Live Poets I". in Selected Poems, pp.49-50.  
drops there and snatches again, drops and again snatches
its broken toys, its whitened pebbles and shells.165

"The Surfer" refers to the vulnerability and fragility of human life; at any moment, destruction can suddenly intrude into delight. In Drewe’s “Stingray”, the poisonous sting he experiences as he is enjoying the surf brings sharp realisation of the arbitrariness of death:

This country is world champion in the venomous creatures’ department. The box jellyfish. Funnel-web spiders. Stonefish. The tiny blue-ringed octopus, carrying enough venom to paralyse ten grown men...It suddenly occurs to him he might be about to die. The randomness and lack of moment are right.166

Perhaps an uneasily suppressed fear of the sea’s potential for destruction underlies a strong apocalyptic consciousness in Australian society discerned by Meaghan Morris,167 expressed in Peter Weir’s film The Last Wave and demonstrated in a quickly acquired, widespread awareness of the idea of the greenhouse effect and predictions of consequent rises in sea levels. In Night Surfing by Fiona Capp there is a recurring nightmare, unconnected to the plot, where a giant wave gathers itself up from the ocean and travels towards the land:

A wave of colossal size towers over the dunes. A black wave that dredges up the sunless depths, a wave that arcs so high it drags down the sun, stars and moon from the sky and turns the day to pitch.

The wave is more than water. It carries a whole universe inside it. What is tossed up from the sea chums with the debris of the land as the inundation gains momentum. Shells, jellyfish, driftwood and deckchairs, bladder-wrack, corrugated iron, car tyres and starfish spiral down the deserted main street as Ruben’s Cafe goes under, its neon lights still glowing beneath the water.168

And perhaps the best-known “beach” novel with an Australian setting is On the Beach (1957), a story set in Melbourne with the final remnants of the human race “beached” on the last habitable shores of the planet, extinguished by the 1950s version of

168 Capp, Night Surfing. p.4. passim.
Nemesis - radioactive fallout from nuclear war. The title comes from the words from Eliot’s *The Waste Land* quoted on the frontespiece:

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river...

This is the way the world ends...
Not with a bang but a whimper.

The beach is also a place where the overwhelming presence of the natural can stimulate the awakening and expression of primitive, violent and libidinal urges. Intuitive understanding of human potential for regression to savagery may have underlain those apparently priggish early restrictions on freedom at the beach. Aggressive behaviour in a comparatively mild form is depicted in the rivalry between surfers and lifesavers (“clubbies”) in *Night Surfing*:

With each succeeding year it was not only his [Jake, a surfer’s] territory the clubbies invaded, but his head as well. He hated the way they came down at weekends and told the locals how to behave. He hated their self-righteousness and all that bronzed Aussie shit. Most of all, he hated the way they set themselves up as the law.

In *Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing* hostility on the part of surf club members towards the narrator for his refusal to rejoin the club and the surfboat team leads to physical aggression. And in *Crew*, Tony McGowan draws on his insider knowledge to portray the world of surfboat crews, their fierce competitiveness and often brutal, drunken and misogynist behaviour a contrast to the idealisation of the lifesaver in most of our folklore.

Drewe enters the mind of a misogynist pervert in “The View from the Sandhills”. The story takes the form of a monologue addressed to an imaginary listener. The narrator has been in gaol for many years for rape and perhaps murder. He now finds the beach the perfect place to feed his obsession:

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170 Capp, *Night Surfing*, p.177.
Sex on my mind the whole time, racing from one beach to another, must have trudged over every sandhill in the state! Now I mostly concentrate on the one beach. Don’t think I’m going to give the beach away!171

He boasts of the techniques he uses to spy on couples, the way he feigns an air of injured innocence when caught and accused of “perving”. The women he observes, responsive in his imagination to his advances, become the object of his obscene fantasies. Not only do the sandhills provide concealment and camouflage and the opportunity to observe near-naked women; the beach and the dunes behind it, an area contested by land and sea where civilization and its constraints can gain no foothold, constitute a “no-man’s-land” attracting the lustful, the lawless and the violent.

Another warped character is portrayed by Drewe in “The Silver Medallist”: a former champion swimmer and lifesaver who is “The Mutton Bird King” on the beach, spraying suntan oil and hiring out rubber floats on Cottesloe beach. At first a slightly absurd figure, still preening himself as a champion, still a strong swimmer but running to flesh, the story takes on darker overtones until at the end it becomes clear that he has been molesting his teenage daughter Geraldine.172 The very sunniness of the beach, its apparent openness, reminds us that appearances often belie reality.

A tragedy on a NSW beach where a 14-year-old girl attending a birthday party at a local surf clubhouse was raped and bashed to death by a boy or boys at the party has inspired two plays by Nick Enright: Blackrock (now also a film) and Property of the Clan. Property of the Clan is performed in schools by the Australian Theatre for Young People, and the actors report that have been struck by the way students in a number of towns where the play has been staged, particularly beachside towns, believe the play is based on an incident that happened in their own town173. It appears that the dark forces unleashed in such events are a pattern, a motif in our history, going back to those scenes on the beach when the female convicts were unloaded from the ships of the First Fleet which were glossed over in the prim language of Arthur Bowes Smyth, surgeon on the Lady Penrhyn:

The Men Convicts got to them [the female convicts] very soon after they landed, & it is beyond my abilities to give a just description of the Scene of Debauchery & Riot that ensued during the night...the Scene which presented itself at this time & during the greater part of the night, beggars every description.\textsuperscript{174}

These works draw on the dark side of the beach's ambivalence, of Dinnerstein's "hurtful, entrancing surround". Its unstructured space, the absence of physical boundaries and limits, has as its counterpart the ignoring or the rejection of moral constraints. The catastrophic storms, the dark shapes which lurk below and beyond the sparkling surf, are as real as the delights we more often prefer to associate with it.

**Conclusion**

Chapters Three and Four have attempted to examine the history of imaginative reference to the beach in Australian literature. There is development from lack of reference to the beach, through an imitative view of the beach as setting for solitary contemplation of nature (the sea), to associations of the beach with enjoyment, sensuality, love, death and loss, to a much broader range of meanings.

The beach has been accorded a much less prominent place in our literature than has the bush; but the beach has been a feature of Australian life for a shorter period, and writing about it has roughly paralleled its assimilation into our ways of being. Thus, when Geoffrey Dutton seeks to explain the absence of the beach from literature by judging that Australian writers have generally been "a peculiarly dry, puritanical lot", and asks:

why, in this glorious country of endless beaches, did no writers remember that Aphrodite rose from the foam, why did they not swim for love like Leander or Byron, or like Walt Whitman let themselves say to the sea 'Dash me with amorous wet.' It is as if our writers were still thinking of the beach and the sea as Englishmen.\textsuperscript{175}


\textsuperscript{175} Dutton, The Myth of the Beach, pp.23-24.
he is closer to the mark in his second judgment - that they were "still thinking of the beach and the sea as Englishmen" (in the derivative nature of writing in the first stage outlined above) than in the first. There are compelling reasons for the primacy of the bush, rather than the beach, in our national literature which have nothing to do with any supposed puritanical attitudes in our writers, as Chapter One has shown.

Similarly, the evidence is against Robert Drewe's view that academics are to blame for the lack of prominence accorded to the beach in Australian writing:

My theory is that, early on, the somewhat wowserish English departments in universities, usually staffed by Englishmen, decided that the dry, asexual myth of the outback was the true national psychic identity. They felt the beach was a place for the hoi polloi, a place where no contemplation went on; it was too alarmingly hedonistic, sensual and flippant to be accorded this status. The inland was seen as tougher, more spiritual, a place of redemptive suffering and sacrifice; somehow more moral and more worthy.

I'm sure it was dictated by the English departments of the universities, not by the people... That early academic view that took a moral aversion to the coast as all too wet and fishy, indolent... was bolstered by visiting academics and writers... 176

Drewe's ascription of "wowserism" to academics in English departments is a "theory" for which he adduces no supporting evidence. 177 After all, academics could only study, review and criticise what had actually been written; and there was not a great deal to study, review and criticise until relatively recently. 178

It remains true that literature referring to the beach during the period of its greatest popularity -- from the early to the middle years of this century -- is comparatively scarce. This could indicate a kind of cultural lag -- a measure of the time it took for direct experience of the beach to be assimilated and imaginatively transformed. There is also evidence from writing for children, and about children's writing, indicating distrust of the seductive lure of the beach. Palmer's The Passage presents

177 At least Dutton bolsters his argument about writers by referring to the absence of the beach in the work of some major poets: McAuley, A.D. Hope, Slessor (with some exceptions noted), Fitzgerald and Brennan, and Xavier Herbert's and Patrick White's writing (but see the episode from Voss discussed in the previous chapter). (Myth of the Beach, p.24).
178 While the quotation at the head of this chapter does suggest distaste for the "hedonistic, sensual and flippant" beach, it is important to note that this is the comment of a British critic, writing for a magazine published in Edinburgh, and says more about English attitudes to Australia than those of local critics.
perhaps the first beachfront developer in Australian literature, one of an enduring breed who continue to degrade or destroy the natural beauty from which they seek to profit. But Boyd and White, in the novels discussed in Chapter Three, discern in the sensuality which is evoked by the beach a countervailing force to the drives for money-making and exploitation which have always been so strong in this country; in this respect they approve of the beach, however qualified their approval of sensuality per se. Similarly, White and Richardson view positively the loosening of the bonds of convention and conformity the beach invites. The association of the beach with negative qualities - of violence, crime and destruction - testifies to the potency and richness of the underlying archetype; and these are outweighed by more positive connotations, in any case. On balance, the evidence does not support Dutton's judgment that the beach has a "bad literary image".

References to the beach in recent works have changed in more ways than their frequency and variety. There is an increasing tendency to assume that the reader shares knowledge and experience of the beach with the writer, so that it is no longer written about as if describing the scene for someone who has never been there, or as if seeing it for the first time. While Sylvia in *Spilt Milk* meditates on as she observes the sea on her walks to Bondi, Bronte or Coogee, she feels no need to describe the beaches themselves; it is taken for granted that we know them too - or at least know beaches which are sufficiently similar for us to recognise their common aspects. In "Bombora", "A Chiming of Light", and *The Under Wharf*, the same assured sense of place is evident: the characters move from the inner city to the beach and back as part of the ordinary course of life, a stitching of the beach into daily experience rather than something to be highlighted, described in detail, a subject in need of explanation and comment.

It has been a truism of commentary on Australian settler culture that it lacks the profound and assured sense of place which is found in older civilizations. Ross Gibson contrasts Australian insecurity in this respect with English attitudes:

*English society perceives itself to be autochthonous - to have grown out of the soil rather than planted itself there... it is, not becomes. English people*
perceive themselves to be inhabiting a culture that covers the countryside. Australia by contrast seems to be neither here nor there.¹⁷⁹

This notion of the illegitimacy of Australian culture is expressed more strongly and elegantly in Shirley Hazzard’s *Transit of Venus*:

> “Grey Winter hath gone, like a wearisome guest,  
> And behold, for repayment.  
> September comes in with the wind of the West  
> And the spring in her rainment.”

You might recite it in Elocution Class, but could hardly have it in English poetry. It was as if the poet had deliberately taken the losing, and Australian side. He had grasped the nettle. But a nettle grasped remains a nettle, and grasping it an unnatural act. What was natural was hedgerows, hawthorn, skylarks, the chaffinch on the orchard bough. You had never seen these but believed in them with perfect faith. As you believed also in the damp, deciduous and rightful seasons of English literature, and in lawns of emerald velours, or in flowers that could only be grown in Australia when the drought broke and with top-dressing. Literature had not simply made these things true. It had shaped Australia in perpetual, flagrant violation of reality.¹⁸⁰

And there is more than one metropolitan centre to which Australians have traditionally looked for the bestowal of legitimacy. In *The New Surf Club*, a 1959 novel for young people by Claire Meillon, the young central character lives in a newly developed suburb on Sydney’s northern beaches. He really wants to belong to Manly, the “star” surf club, but becomes a member of the new club in his home suburb, though it seems dull and unexciting in comparison with the more glamorous, older club. It is not until a stereotypical American tourist, Alvin J. Hamberg, exclaims with wonder and admiration at the beauty of the beach and the heroism of the volunteer lifesavers that the boy sees his surroundings in a new light:

> “If we had this over in the States, you guys would be national heroes... we’d tell the whole world about you!”¹⁸¹

At the end of the book the new surf club receives a great financial boost from the donation of a surfboat by Alvin J. Hamberg, now back in the USA but still mightily impressed by what he has seen. The approbation of an observer from “overseas” signified a seal of approval which no mere local authority could have bestowed.

These manifestations of cultural cringe would seem incomprehensible to the youngest of the contemporary writers dealt with in this chapter. Sometimes the response is to glory in the difference, to highlight the advantages of what a new society has to offer, as when Gail Morgan contemplates the hillside leading down to Bondi:

Red roofs danced in a low slung limbo to the Pacific, held down by a bar of sky, and summoned to the sea. Elegant and easy contortions of the landscape defied the logic of human construction. Writhing trees, snakes of banksia, bottlebrush bowed and weighed by colour, all danced blue-black against the light.

There is so much space here, such a wild intense feeling of pleasure and pain and beauty. It was like a marriage feast, with the aged resigned and gone to bed. A new bargain about to be struck, no one knowing where the revelry will take them, but all grief for the dying world put aside, in the hope of love, a new start...In Europe, the land had become tethered, a large beast, sorrowful and encumbered. Who would ever give it a chance to show its sublime spirit again?

However, as Gibson argues is the case for the relationship of English society to its environment, for most of these newer writers the place where they live simply is. Thus the treatment of the beach in Australian writing does provide an index of Australians coming-to-be-at-home-in-a-place, a process which it was one of the purposes of this survey to investigate.

There are intimations of the meanings of the beach derived from the analysis of Dinnerstein’s and Brown’s arguments presented earlier, particularly with reference to depictions of the intensity of experience of the present moment, release or “time out” from the pressures of work and history, and the frequent association of the joy of the beach with realisation of death and loss and of the impermanence of human life and achievement.

As the shared experience of the beach has become a taken-for-granted aspect of life in this country, as the beach and its connotations are assimilated more deeply, as archetype, into the unconscious of those who grow up here, then the imaginative treatment of the beach in literature and in the arts generally becomes more indirect, less literal, more metaphorical, and therefore more difficult to identify. For example,
Linda Jaivin’s erotic novel *Eat Me*, is a witty, “over the top” portrayal of an amazing variety of sexual activities, undertaken in a spirit of fun or experiment, without shame or a heavy sense of emotional involvement. It could be argued that these behaviours exhibit Freud’s “polymorphous perverse play of infantile sexuality”, the lack of inhibition and comfortable sense of being at ease with their bodies exhibited by the young Sydney characters who are the subject of her novel (and by characters from a similar milieu to that of Naher’s *The Under Wharf*) resulting from their lifelong acquaintance with the beach - argued, but again “not proven”.

For all that, writing which draws on the beach remains a relatively insubstantial contribution to the corpus of Australian literature. Meaghan Morris’ reference to “a vast anthology” is not the case as far as literature is concerned. This is partly because of the comparatively recent incorporation of the beach in Australian life; because of the ideological factors explored in Chapter One; but also for a more fundamental reason - there are no myths of the beach in Western culture comparable to the great Western myths of place: the city, the *polis*, site of our greatest achievements and deepest corruption; the virtues and attractions of *Life on the Land*; and the *Wilderness of the Romantic Imagination*. The only contender has been the firmly Other-focussed myth of the Noble Savage, its exotic exemplars the sensuous Tahitians and the happy South Sea Islanders. There are many reasons why such an image has long been unacceptable to us; but this may be yet another Self-Other distinction which is in the process of dissolving. If history is kind, aspects of this myth are likely be reworked into new Australian myths yet to evolve. And fantasies and fables now being written for children suggest that creatures of the sea, like seals, whales and dolphins, will embody special significance in legends-to-come.

There is one important writer with a sense of the significance of the sea for Australians so powerful that it warrants consideration in a discussion of myth. Christina Stead describes Australia’s place in the world in the Prologue to *For Love Alone*:

> This island continent lies in the water hemisphere... The other world – the old world, the land hemisphere – is far above her... From that world... the

183 Brown, *Life Against Death*, p.29.
people came, all by steam; or their parents, all by sail... there is nothing in the interior, so people look toward the water, and above to the fixed stars and constellations... The skies are sub-tropical, crusted with suns and spirals, as if a reflection of the crowded Pacific Ocean, with its reefs, atolls and archipelagos. It is a fruitful island of the sea-world, a great Ithaca... 184

Although Stead is on the right wavelength when she writes of Australia as “a fruitful island of the sea-world, a great Ithaca”, Ithaca is the island from which Ulysses set forth on his Odyssey, leaving Penelope behind. It evokes the image of Australians as travellers leaving their island in search of the Great World (as Stead herself did, returning, like Ulysses, after many years away) - not those for whom the beach is part of their lives. But her concern for and perception of Australian identity inform her earlier novel Seven Poor Men of Sydney, (1934), where she presents a brilliant allegorical vision of the contribution of the sea to Australia’s history and destiny.

At one level Seven Poor Men of Sydney portrays characters living in the city and trapped by poverty; but at another level, the characters represent the various ways in which Australians have failed to fashion an authentic culture and to find a genuine homeland here. 185 Michael Baguenault rejects the church and the notion that Australia is to be “a new Britannia” but he succumbs to mindless materialism for a while, goes to Europe to fight in World War I, and returns home “weathered and self-centred” 186, deciding that life is a game with no meaning -a paradigm of the developing Australian nation. Life without belief becomes intolerable, and Michael commits suicide by throwing himself into the sea off The Gap. His half-sister, Catherine, suffers the double burden of being a woman in a society where negative stereotypes of woman are pervasive, and an adherent of an alien European political philosophy (socialism). Her way out is to commit herself to a lunatic asylum. The other poor men “adjust” to life in Australia by indulging in cynicism and unbridled personal licence (Tom Withers); espousing Anglophile values and exploiting his workers (Gregory Chamberlain); leaving for America (Baruch Mendelssohn). Tom Winter goes to prison. Only Joseph Baguenault endures, accepting his ordinariness and his banal life; but he is the one who tells the tale of the seven poor men at the

184 Stead, For Love Alone, pp.1-2.
end. He succeeds by surviving. It is a gloomy picture, foretold by the foreign
schoolteacher early in the novel:

You have no notion of history... Doctrine, constitution, order, duty,
religion, you have to find them out by long and droughty explorations of
the spirit. 187

Reasons why “long and droughty explorations of the spirit” had ended in failure for
his companions are summed up in the “In Memoriam” speech by Michael’s friend Kol
Blount near the end of the novel. In the grounds of the lunatic asylum where
Catherine is living (Australia?) Blount describes, in a passage reminiscent of the
Genesis account but with far more vivid, concentrated images, the birth of Australia:
“the water continent, solitarily uprising” from the sea in prehistoric times. He tells of
the arrival of “native youth”, the original inhabitants, growing in intimate knowledge
of the land, the sea around it, and all the flora and fauna of that land and that sea. The
arrival of Europeans is disposed of in a paragraph: a summary tale of violence and
plunder, until now

After all this notable pioneer tale of starvation, sorrow, escapades, mutiny,
death, labour in common, broad wheatlands, fat sheep, broad cattle-barons,
raw male youth and his wedding to the land, in the over-populated
metropolis the sad-eyed youth sits glumly in a hare-brained band, and
speculates upon the suicide of youth, the despair of the heirs of yellow
heavy-headed acres. What a history is that; what an enigma is that? 188

‘The despair of the heirs of yellow heavy-headed acres”: even though we have drawn
much wealth from the land, we are not happy. 189 Blount recognises that we need to
fashion a way of life that is authentic, that accommodates to the country that we
inhabit, and that using ideas imported from other cultures condemns us to be alien and
second-rate:

Why are we here? Nothing floats down here, this far in the south, but is worn
out with wind, tempest and weather; all is flotsam and jetsam. They leave
their rags and tatters here: why do we have to be dressed? The sun is hot
enough; why can’t we run naked in our own country, on our own land, and

187 Stead, Seven Poor Men, p.17.
188 Stead, Seven Poor Men, p.308.
189 Echoing the words of Henry Handel Richardson: “It was like a form of revenge taken on them, for
their loveless schemes of robbing and fleecing: a revenge contrived by the ancient, barbaric country
they had so lightly invaded.” (From the “Proem”, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, London: Angus &
work out our own destiny? Eating these regurgitated ideas from the old country makes us sick and die of sickness. Are we vultures to eat the corpses come down here to bleach their bones in the antipodes?...

His view is bitter and pessimistic, suggesting that in our isolation, our timid conformity and our ineptitude, we will never belong here. It seems that Michael, unable to come to terms with the “bitter heart of the land” has abandoned himself to the sea - another “heart made of salt” - in his suicide. Blount sees no answer to the “dilemma” of Australia, and laments that “Our land never should have been won.”

But a “madman” suddenly breaks into Blount’s peroration:

The madman at this moment approached solemnly, with quiet dignity, and cried: “My blood is running back to the sea. Out of the sea I rose, you have clipped my wings, I cannot rise again. I must drink the salt of the sea!”

Throughout the ages prophets have appeared in the guise of madmen. If we take the utterance of the madman, with his “quiet dignity”, as prophetic, then we need to remember always that we came from the sea and the sea is in our blood. We must therefore engage with both the heart of the land - the dead heart, the inland sea - and our sea-surround - the “heart made of salt” - to know and to understand both, as the “native youth” did, if we are truly to belong here. We also face the difficult task of reconciling the “malign and bitter genius of this waste land...its heart made of salt [which] oozes from its burning pores, gold which will destroy men in greed, but not water to give them drink” with the beauty of so much of the landscape, and the playground of delight which is our sea-edge, our beaches. And the coast with its beaches, the meeting-place of, the interchange between, land and sea, where most of us live, is where we must work to achieve this accommodation.

The next two chapters suggest more subtle meanings of the beach which have not been discussed up till now, variations on the theme of national identity - a contentious concept in itself - and other motifs in Australian life and history, all reflecting ways in which the beach has influenced Australian culture.

190 Stead, Seven Poor Men, p.308.
191 Stead, Seven Poor Men, p.309.
192 Stead, Seven Poor Men, p.308.
193 Stead, Seven Poor Men, p.309.
CHAPTER FIVE

INFLUENCES OF THE BEACH IN AUSTRALIAN CULTURE I: “NATIONAL CHARACTER” AND THE BEACH

In margins and in longings: this is where all homelands begin.1

In the past, attempts to construct a stereotype of the “typical Australian” drew heavily on the connotations of the bush experience. Over recent decades there have been indications that the ethos of the bush is gradually waning and that modern Australians are preoccupied with life along the coast. Could an argument now be sustained that the beach has influenced the kind of people Australians are?

This chapter examines how the ways Australians feel, think, value and behave might be affected by their experience of the beach. To undertake this task is to run the gauntlet of critical disapproval, for any suggestion that one can generalise about national characteristics goes against the grain of much contemporary critical debate. In a review of National Characteristics, by American Dean Peabody – a work which combines a statistical treatment of sociological research with socio-historical reviews of the cultures of mainly European countries – the reviewer notes that “it is obvious that comparing national characters is the kind of vast inchoate subject, associated with the nineteenth century, which professionals view today with deep suspicion”.2

Peabody mounts a spirited defence of his attempt to ascribe validity to measures of national characteristics as perceived both by outsiders and by nationals themselves, asserting the usefulness of generalising about such matters despite widespread academic rejection:

generalisation and categorisation is an unavoidable psychological tendency. The world may be in continual flux... no event may ever repeat itself, and each individual may be unique. Still, in order to learn anything from

1 Janette Turner Hospital, “Litany for the Homeland”, in Collected Stories, p.411.
experience, a human (or any other animal) must be prepared to bypass such differences and respond to similarities of events and people.  

He attacks the inconsistency of social scientists who make sweeping generalisations in their own areas of interest but deny others a similar freedom:

the same social scientists who are against the first [the concept of 'national character'] are typically in favour of the second [social class differences] and would not accept the argument that social class differences are ruled out because there is variation within social classes. National differences are felt to be somehow fascist; to oppose them is to be on the side of the angels. On the other hand, to favour social class differences [and, one might add, generalisations in feminist writings about women and men] is to be progressive.

Peabody also rejects the idea that those who employ generalisations about national character believe they are true of all members of that nationality, or that they believe national characteristics are innate and therefore not subject to change. He concludes that

the social scientists have assumed without adequate evidence the irrationality of judgments by ordinary people about national groups. Thus [they] fit one of...many definitions of prejudice: “Thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant.”

Fortified by Peabody’s arguments, I will suggest ways in which a people who share a common physical environment and set of similar experiences in relation to that environment (the beach) might be different from those who live somewhere else and are not subject to those commonalities, seeking to identify a pattern of characteristics within Australian life not hitherto described although, in keeping with the tenor of the argument to follow, I prefer to think of them as national tendencies rather than national characteristics.

The concept of national identity

Consideration of what it means to be Australian, and of the contribution of the beach to this understanding, invites exploration of concepts of national character and

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4 Peabody, National Characteristics, p. 10.
5 Peabody, National Characteristics, p. 19.
national identity, and takes the argument into an area of fiercely contested, some would say obsessive, social and intellectual debate - a debate which has a long history. Early definitions of Australianness which drew on qualities ascribed to the bushman have already been noted. When his book *The Australian Legend* was first published Russel Ward was unfairly criticised for not giving a balanced view of Australian history, when his intention clearly and explicitly was to trace the development of an Australian *self-image*:

> National character is not...something inherited; nor is it, on the other hand, entirely a figment of the imagination of poets, publicists and other feeble dreamers. It is rather a people's idea of itself and this stereotype, though often absurdly romanticized and exaggerated, is always connected with reality in two ways. It springs largely from a people's past experiences, and it often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they ought 'typically' to behave.  

The concept of *national character* alluded to by Ward has largely been replaced by the idea of *national identity* in more recent writings which have sought to describe and analyse Australian life, or, more opportunistically, has been invoked by those promoting advertising and commercial ventures who sought to give their products wide appeal by stimulating feelings of nationalistic fervour. Where earlier writers drew mainly on history and literature in their analyses of Australian life, increasingly the later works on national identity look at the details of contemporary life from a political perspective, and find much to criticise in older versions of Australianness – indeed, in the very concept of a national identity itself. Thus Richard White asserted that

> A national identity is an invention. There is no point asking whether one version of this essential Australia is truer than another because they are all intellectual constructs, neat, tidy, comprehensible - and necessarily false. When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve... [they are] part of the cultural baggage

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6 See Chapter One, pp.31-33.
which Europeans brought with them, and with which we continue to encumber ourselves...

Major social changes occurring over the past generation have seemingly conspired to demolish versions of *national identity* which seek to distinguish “a pervasive pattern which characterises all the activities of a given society; a common style reflected in the thought, the arts, the social institutions, the language, the ways of life and action, of an entire society”. Feminist studies have played their part in this demolition, as has been noted. Postmodern intellectual theory has sought to deconstruct the meaning of and thereby to lay bare the political realities underlying apparently innocuous or hitherto accepted ideas and social institutions. Its logic is necessarily anti-essentialist: nothing is “really” as it seems; the question that must be asked is, who chooses that particular construct - and why? Even as Dobrez expresses reservations about this approach:

> many Postmodern texts [are] all too quick to fetishize difference - that is, to appropriate heterogeneity as a virtue while marginalizing the anti-heterogeneity argument so that, in the end, nothing appears more homogeneous than difference...

he also concedes it may be the lesser of two evils:

> nominalist anti-essentialism seems a better option...since it speaks the language of pluralism and demystification[ ] After all, isn’t today’s alternative the obscene essentialism of ethnic cleansing?

It follows that where difference is valued, attempts to generalise, as in the case of defining national identity, are rejected.

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8White, *Inventing Australia*, pp.viii-ix. A similar scepticism had been expressed, from the opposite ideological standpoint, by James McAuley twenty years earlier: “I have had the indecency to refer the Australian Tradition, as it has operated over the last generation, to the Communist apparatus which injected a pseudo-life into it, in order to bring out...that any talk of a single true Australian tradition is really a mask for a set of demands: either a promotional device in the interests of particular individuals, or a politico-ideological manoeuvre, or both” (in “Literature and the Arts”, *Australian Civilization*, p.125).
10See Chapter One, p.37.
Changes in official policy on migrants and Aborigines from assimilation - which in its simplest, most literal form involved the idea that everyone who lives in Australia will adopt the same culture - to multiculturalism in the case of migrants, and self-determination in the case of Aborigines, clearly signalled the breakdown of a monolithic, monocultural ideal of Australianness. In *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*, the authors regard appeals to an idea of national identity as one of the methods used to perpetuate and increase inequality and, in discriminating against migrants, to maintain an "Anglocentric" ascendancy. They see

The step beyond multiculturalism [as] the transcending of national identity, the denial of its necessity, the recognition that through the crisis of modernity we are now all in the same boat - economically, ecologically and politically. Human identity must become transnational.

Even more recently, prophets of the new world of cyberspace, computers and the Internet predict that notions of identity will be radically transformed by the almost instantaneous communication with all parts of the world the Web provides:

Cassandra Pybus, the editor of *Australian Humanities Review*, a journal on the Internet, observes that the absence of geographic borders in cyberspace is changing the sense of geographic limitations, and with it, geographically induced insecurities. "The geekgirl site on the Internet, established by Sydney resident Rosie Cross, is a major international site", says Pybus. "Nobody even thinks about that site as being Australian."

Thus a formidable array of forces combine to reinforce the message that national identity is not only an invention but an idea that is obsolete, harmful, and yet another way in which the powerful are able to assert dominance over the powerless.

At the same time, however, there are intriguing signs of a countervailing movement back to a qualified, almost reluctant acknowledgement that there is some value in

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13. As has been indicated, however, such an idea has never been as clearcut and generally accepted as a quick overview might suggest.


identifying what Australians have in common as well as what divides them. On the
one hand there is a movement to embrace what might be termed the best of both
worlds - to celebrate the internal diversity of Australian society but also to see this
very diversity, this “openness and plurality [as] ...not only existing Australian
characteristics, but ...normative goals the achievement of which it is properly the
business of the state to facilitate" - in other words, to make this openness and
plurality central to Australians’ definition of themselves. Graeme Turner pays tribute
to nationalism’s ability to redefine itself. “It is unwise to assume that nationalism will
always mean the same thing, will always serve the same kinds of interest, and will
always operate as a conservative ideology.” He lists the characteristics of a “more
appropriate post-colonial collective identity”: it must be plural; based on recognition
rather than overriding of cultural difference; and accept and negotiate its dual history
as colonised and coloniser.

A significant reason for this reappraisal of the value of analyses of cultural identity is
the perceived threat posed by global capitalism. There is a view that the powers of the
nation state are being cut back to make way for an ‘efficient’ order of production and
trade by those very forces, corporate and political, which most actively promote the
nationalist chorus. Paul James agrees that the postmodernists’ critique of
nationalism is complicit with the openness brought about by the internationalisation of
capital and the dissolution of the old, closed national form, while also noting the
“more open, abstract” character of contemporary nationalism. And Dobrez concurs
in seeing the likely demise of nationalism and national identity in Australia as a
“mixed blessing”: “It was Susan George, I think, who noted that nationalism may
well be all that stands between the politically weak and the global forces of corporate
capitalism”.

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1David Goodman, “Postcript 1991 - explicating Openness”, in Celebrating the Nation: A Critical
Study of Australia’s Bicentenary, edited by Tony Bennett, Pat Buckridge, David Carter and Colin
2Turner, Making it National, p.122.
3Turner, Making it National, p.123.
4Peter Cochrane and David Goodman. “The Great Australian Journey: Cultural Logic and
Nationalism in the Postmodern Era”, in Celebrating the Nation, p.175.
6Dobrez, Identifying Australia, p.xi.
“Oh no, not again!” cried John Douglas Pringle in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. “Not one, not two, but four more books all probing, from different angles, that aching tooth called the Australian identity...”  

Richard White had written in 1981 that Australians were obsessed with the notion of national identity; in 1995 Dobrez implied that this was still the case:

> Few topics have generated more seminars, conferences, publications and arguments. Can we, in the recent words of an eminent scholar, squeeze any more juice from this particular lemon?  

He went on to answer his own question by editing a book of essays on the subject.

This continuing discussion of national identity suggests a need that lies deeper than fashionable intellectual debate. According to Inglis, a French writer on national identity has argued that the sentiment of nationality “usually becomes conscious through struggle against an Other with whom one is in economic, geopolitical or religious conflict.” This is a phenomenon well known and used by national leaders to shore up support; but despite chronic low-level paranoia about such matters, Australians have no clear-cut enemy, no geographical, historical, political or religious forces against whom they can define themselves: no nearby aggressive neighbour, no war of independence, no bloody internal conflicts. Others might well envy us this good fortune; but it leaves us, as Ross Gibson puts it, “neither here nor there.” In lieu of circumstances being forced upon us, we have to make decisions based on a sense of ourselves; and if a sense of ourselves is lacking, what is our yardstick? Arthur Koestler was one of the first intellectuals to perceive this dilemma; on a visit here in 1969 he wrote:

> The search for identity has become a fashionable phrase, but in Australia it is a real problem, and a haunting one.

He foresaw the debate over immigration policy regarding the admission of Asians and the debate over policies of assimilation versus the preservation of migrants’ cultural

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23 Dobrez, *Identifying Australia*, p.i.

24 Quoted in Inglis, “Multiculturalism and National Identity”, p.19.

25 Quoted in Inglis, “Multiculturalism and National Identity”, p.17.
identity, putting these questions in terms of the new vocabulary of identity. More recently, Turner has pointed out that a sense of shared history is the real basis for most nations’ sense of themselves, and our lack of such history forces us to find other means of self-definition:

the older nations...have more densely mythologised histories from which explanations or legitimations can more explicitly emerge. The newer nations have to undertake the process of nation formation explicitly, visibly, defensively, and are always being caught in the act - embarrassed in the process of construction.26

Despite predictions of the demise of a sense of national identity in the face of all the divisive and internationalising influences outlined above, and in light of the resilience of the surrounding debate, it appears that exploration of Australianness and Australian identity will continue to be important in our social and intellectual life, if only because the consequences have such practical importance - as Arthur Koestler recognised nearly thirty years ago.

This may seem to have been a lengthy digression from an original simple question: how does the experience of the beach affect what it means to be Australian? But awareness of this contemporary debate is necessary in order to glean whatever insights it presents, or simply to move beyond or beside it. It is clear that the categories employed in the debate have become diffuse, lacking precise definition: writers switch from “nationalism” to “the nation” to “national self-image” to “national identity” to “national type” to “the Australian way of life”, to “cultural identity”, and so on. There is usually no attempt to distinguish between these terms; only Ken Inglis seems to have done so in a deliberate, systematic way, and in the article where this occurs he is an observer of the debate rather than a participant in it.27 What seems clear is that the “national identity” aspect of the concept, viewed from a political or

26Turner, Making it National, p.123. I have a vivid memory of watching a TV documentary on the Polish Solidarity movement. It showed the various meetings at which the trade unionists hammered out the plan of their struggle over the Gdansk shipyards. Several times the discussion seemed to evoke in all those present at the meeting a spontaneous response, whereby they rose as one and broke into song - some stirring evocation of past struggles known to all. One wonders what it would be like to belong to a society where solidarity based on a common store of memories could be so much taken for granted.

27Inglis’ chapter in Australian National Identity contains a summary of the uses of the various terms “national character”, “national consciousness”, “national culture” and “national identity”.
ideological perspective, has come to predominate, to a degree where others are warned off the turf - Graeme Turner writes that "we must break forever with the tradition of cultural analysis which addresses the nation as a psychological rather than a political entity - for example, Hugh Mackay in *Reinventing Australia*." The idea of national identity is invoked by those attempting to promote social coherence by adopting a unifying discourse, but also by those who seek to manipulate it for commercial purposes; opposition to the idea is argued by those who regard it as manipulative, or who welcome or predict its demise; while still others, often trenchant critics of what they regard as an excluding notion of national identity but perhaps belatedly perceiving the dangers of total fragmentation, tread a difficult path:

We are going to have to come up with a particular radical kind of unifying discourse: one that accepts the multiplicities and contradictory discourses of the interest in whose names it speaks.

Where does the beach fit in all this? One thing is clear: it is frequently invoked as a vivid image of the Australian way of life in the advertising of products and the promotion of tourism - so frequently, in fact, that its pervasiveness - its "massive, obsessive inscription", in Meagan Morris' words - seems to support the view of the beach as archetype presented in the Introduction to this study. It is this appropriation of the beach to the purposes of capitalism, and the "contesting" of ideas about the beach which has captured the attention of critics adopting a cultural studies approach in analysing the meaning of the beach in Australian popular culture.

The link between national identity and the beach is directly explored in Anne Game's "Nation and Identity: Bondi". She notes Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an "imagined community", the collective representations of which have a

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28Turner, *Making it National*, p.174. He does not explain why this has to be so. No doubt it is because treating a nation as a psychological entity involves the dreaded universalising tendency, where differences relating to class, gender, ethnicity, etc., are glossed over or ignored.

29The construction of a "unifying discourse" is seen by James Walter as the task of the political imagination, and a measure of its current failure ("The Failure of political imagination: reflections promoted by the 1993 federal election", *Australian Quarterly*, Autumn 1993, pp.550-557).


31Morris, "On the Beach", p.102.

32Archetype can of course be degraded to stereotype when treated in a crass or simplistic fashion.

33In *New Formations*, no. 11, Summer 1990, pp.105-121.
unifying effect, "a deep, horizontal comradeship"; but she rejects the idea that representations of Bondi are either unitary or unifying. She examines the meanings of Bondi, an urban beach where

nature is to be engaged with rather than sanctified, visited and left.

...it is an everyday affair, an other that has been successfully incorporated...this self is not split or separated, but merged with elements of nature. Such identifications with Bondi are perhaps, then, in the pre-symbolic realm of the Imaginary...It brings to mind Freud’s account of the ‘oceanic feeling’, the lack of boundary between ego and outside world.

Game thus touches on ideas about the beach which are explored in this investigation; she also recognises that “nature/culture” and “work/play” oppositions are disrupted or overcome in the incorporation of the beach into the lives of those who feel “at home” there. But she is more interested in the contradictions and tensions between competing ideas of Bondi held by residents, beachgoers, tourists, and those who seek to “beautify” Bondi, detecting “little agreement about what constitutes the ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ of Bondi or the relation between them.” She identifies “contradictory discourses” in attitudes towards being Australian, being egalitarian: “The sea is an equalizer; no one owns the sun, sea, surf - or everyone, all Australians own it”; ownership is a reward for work; pleasure can be achieved without work on the beach.

Game’s central argument is that if Bondi is used as a symbol of the nation, there are so many competing meanings clustered around that symbol that its celebration merely reveals the contradictions within the idea of national identity itself.

Game refers favourably to another analysis of Bondi by Noel Sanders. This article contains much information about the beach and the suburb but is basically a stream-

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35Game, “Nation and Identity”, pp.109-110. She refers here to Freud’s definition of the “oceanic feeling” - a feeling of oneself as something limitless. Freud states that this occurs because the boundaries between the ego and the world are ill-defined in very early life, and also threaten to melt away when one is in love (Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, translated by Joan Riviere, revised and edited by James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press, 1973, I, pp.1-10).
36Game, “Nation and Identity”, p.112.
37Game, “Nation and Identity”, p.115.
38Game also notes: “There has been surprisingly little written by academics on Bondi, and I suspect that it is regarded as a not quite proper object of analysis” (p.120).
of-consciousness, loosely structured setting down of ideas, themes and issues associated with Bondi, some of them similar to Game’s, but expressed more obscurely:

The possibility of its [Bondi’s] aestheticization is continually foreclosed by a doubt which indicates two beaches, one looking toward the sea (‘closer to the body, to the drift’) and the other across the beach to the suburb and the city beyond.\(^\text{40}\)

Sanders’ point seems to be that there are so many aspects of Bondi, so politically charged, that “The Barthian quest for an unalloyed ‘aesthetic’ discourse\(^\text{41}\)” is impossible.

Other writers in the cultural studies movement have turned their attention to the beach as an aspect of Australian popular culture. In “Reading the Beach”, John Fiske presents a set of ideas about the beach based on observation of the beaches south of Perth, notably Cottesloe, centring on the nature/culture dichotomy, or more precisely the continuum where culture gradually gives way to nature, ranging from the city to road to the lawn strip to beach to shallow water to deep water. He regards pressures to prohibit or regulate activities on the beach as attempts to control the threat of too much meaning, of violating conceptual boundaries by signifying too much of both nature and culture simultaneously. Surfers, despite their language of freedom and sensuality, are constructed as individuals competing in the capitalist rat race like the rest of us. Ultimately the beach according to Fiske is “a text of mundane pleasure”; its apparent invitation to freedom is illusory, for it too has been appropriated for the purposes of capitalism.\(^\text{42}\)

More insightful, less reductionist is an essay on “The Beach” in *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture*, which Fiske co-authors with Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner. It notes the apparent paradox that the beach, symbolic of nature and the outdoors, is usually a city beach, and that its increasing centrality to Australian

\(^{39}\)Noel Sanders, “‘Bondi the Beautiful’: the Impossibility of an Aesthetic”, *Media Papers*. 16 (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, NSWIT, 1982).

\(^{40}\)Sanders, “‘Bondi the Beautiful’”, p. 7.

\(^{41}\)Sanders, “‘Bondi the Beautiful’”, p. 23.

\(^{42}\)John Fiske, “Reading the Beach”. p.76.
myths coincides with increasing urbanisation. The bronzed lifesaver has taken over from the bushman as an idealised figure in harmony with nature and toughly physical. There are two apparently contradictory paradigms of the beach: one as intrinsically part of the city and therefore “culture”; the other as “nature”, an alternative to the suburb. The most popular beaches accept both meanings simultaneously. Surf beaches, in the challenge they present and the vigour they require, are definitive, at the top of a hierarchy where, lower down the hierarchy, the safe harbourside beaches still contain echoes of the freedom the rougher beaches provide. There are highly conventionalised beach rituals, impregnated with clues to status and role distinctions. The rivalry between surfers and lifesavers personifies the opposing meanings of the beach, the lifesavers representing culture and social control, the surfers representing the rejection of work and responsibility: “the lifesaver is the land, the surfer the sea”.  

Notions of youth versus age, sexism, the colonisation of the beach by the dominant culture, “elements of resistance” possible in the surf, and other aspects of the nature/culture distinction are dealt with. The authors conclude:

It is the flexibility of the beach, its wide potential for meaning, that allows different sections of society to find in it different ways of articulating, different ways of relating to, this deep biblical opposition between land and sea, or the basic anthropological one between culture and nature.

This investigation obviously has no quarrel with the notion that the beach has “a wide potential for meaning”; and some of the ideas presented in “The Beach” will be taken up again in discussion further into this chapter. But the references to “different sections of society”, “different ways of articulating”, and “different ways of relating” in their concluding statement exemplify the tendency of writers on popular culture to focus on contestation and conflict, to note what divides people rather than what they have in common. These writers, particularly Fiske in “Reading the Beach”, discuss the scene they are observing through abstract analysis or as detached reporters.

43 Ed Jaggar rejects this opposition, contending that many surf lifesavers when not on patrol were little different to the boardriders of the 60s and 70s, and that “regimentation and discipline co-existed with flamboyant surfer individualism in many clubs.” (“Surf Lifesaver as National Symbol”, p.8).
People exist as puppets manipulated by hegemony or as rebels reacting against the dominant culture; the Bakhtinian notion that "people resist and subvert at the same time as they reinforce dominant ideologies" is a constant and common theme. While it is reasonable to point out that we have to step outside familiar ways of thinking in order to perceive the phenomena which the students of popular culture bring to our attention, it can also be argued, on the basis of an examination of these works, that the status of the writer as observer "leaks" (to use a favourite term from cultural theory) into that of outsider. While Fiske recognises the sensuality of the surfie and uses an analysis of language in surfing magazines to support his argument, one has the feeling that Fiske himself is a stranger to the joy they experience and which has been explored in this investigation.

Thus, while recent writings on popular culture and the beach probe the meanings of the beach, they emphasise difference and conflict, so aligning themselves with the anti-national identity side of the debate, and their sometimes illuminating observations are "skin-deep"; it is not their intention to examine the subjective experience which has been explored in this study. And in their preoccupation with difference they ignore shared qualities of the beach experience, "the unnoticed structures, the concealed meanings, aspects of life all the more vital for being obscured..." 

Features of the beach archetype which were explored in the previous chapter, as well as others to be teased out in more detail in the following sections, reside in the psyche of many Australians and influence them, and through them the culture in general, in subtle and elusive ways. Exploration of these influences enables the formulation of a new version of national characteristics, relating properties of the beach archetype to

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4 Fiske, Hodge and Turner, "The Beach". p.72.
5 Fiske, "Reading the Beach". p.3.
6 Stephen Knight, The Selling of the Australian Mind: From First Fleet to Third Mercedes, Port Melbourne, Victoria: William Heinemann Australia, 1990, p.8. Knight is not referring to the beach here; indeed, he lumps the beach with sport in stating that "None of these have played much part in my experience of Australia, nor do they have, in my view, much significance in the deep laid realities of life in this country..." (p.7). But Knight came to Australia from England as a young man, and lacks the experience which might have sensitised him to the "concealed meanings" of the beach. Meaghan Morris disagrees with him: "The beach for me has always been a 'deep-laid' and thus ambiguous, reality of life... when I read Knight's dedication, 'For Margaret, who kept me here', I realize that were I to make such a tribute I could say, most sincerely, 'For the beach'..."("On the Beach", pp.101-102).
its effects on the kind of people we are and are becoming. And unlike previous
versions of national character, this new version is gender/sex irrelevant.\footnote{As far as enjoyment is concerned, there is no sex-based discrimination or segregation on the beaches. While a strongly masculine ethos may persist in surf clubs, surfboat crews and some of the surfer sub-cultures, there are women lifesavers today, as many girls as boys among the “Little Nippers” in training, and women and girls competing in surfing and lifesaving competitions; these are not central features of the beach archetype, in any case. The implications of the differences noted in Chapter Four (pp. 171-172) have yet to be explored.}

Marginality

From the perspective of an eagle or looking down from a plane flying along
Australia’s coastline, the country’s boundary is one, indivisible, a clearcut edge. The
land ends abruptly as the sea takes over. No country could wish for its territory to be
more unambiguously outlined:

To live on an island nation is to distinguish
frontiers from boundaries. One doesn’t
negotiate with oceans. I need
no visa, after lunch on our friends’
breezy veranda, to borrow their boat
and float a hundred metres over stone.\footnote{Andrew Taylor, “Sandstone 30” in \emph{Sandstone}, p.79.}

All Australians share this reality of containment. It means that wherever we go we
eventually run up against an edge, which is mostly also a beach:

\begin{quote}
Living on an island
no matter how big, reminds me
of edges. The coast is our skin
and what goes on inside it goes on
within. If we climb mountains
swim across lakes, walk the Nullarbor
we encounter a coast.\footnote{Taylor, “Sandstone 36”, p.84.}
\end{quote}

Coast is also margin. Remote from centres of culture and power, Australians have
readily conceived of themselves as a \emph{marginalised} people, considered by themselves
and others to be not quite the genuine article, irrelevant to the important concerns of
the \emph{real} world in the Northern Hemisphere. The concept of \emph{marginality} has of course
become a fashionable one in contemporary intellectual debate, particularly in writings on postcolonialism, and the relationship of the centre to the margin was first posed as that between the oppressor and the oppressed. But the idea has taken another twist with the margin now being regarded as the site of creativity and potential, for both individuals:

[The edge is where] everything is being rearranged and redefined. The edge is where things happen, where sudden discoveries illuminate hidden memories: where revelations and metamorphoses occur...[It is] also the edge of the self where inside and outside meet...indeed where all the intellectual and creative functions of our consciousness are performed. 51

and nations:

[There is] a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. 52

Australia has been characterised as a key site for the working out of the centre-margin opposition:

in recent decades...Australia's ubiquity - its simultaneous marginality and centrality to the worlds of Western power and belief has become explicit. It is both a long way from the world...and it is nowhere in particular...an unsettled load ballasted with a clutter of cargo - the mythologies of nationalism and colonialism, rural romanticism, hedonist modernism and wildstyle postmodernity. 53

It is coincidental that Gibson uses a maritime metaphor - of cargo and ballast - to characterise a disordered jostling of movements and ideas. A striking analogue of the

51Martin Leer, “On the Edge: Geography and the Imagination in the World of David Malouf”, *Australian Literary Studies*, 12 (1 May 1985), p.11. Notions of “centre” and “margin” now appear to be so interchangeable that their meanings run the risk of petering out in confusion - for example, in “Playing Centre Field: Representation and Cultural Difference” in *Representation, Discourse and Desire: Contemporary Australian Culture and Critical theories*, edited by Patrick Fuery, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1994, Sneja Guncw writes: “The traditional Australian nationalist subject requires the imprimatur of the international ‘centre’ to authenticate its reality - and paradoxically, its marginality... My thesis here is that there are always centres though they are not always the same one (eg metropolitan, institutional, geographic, textual) and consequently there are always margins... those who are situated in these margins are constantly bruised by running up against supposedly non-existent centres” (p.78, p.87).


53Gibson, *South of the West*, p.xi.
promiscuous pot-pourri he depicts is the edge of the beach, the tideline where “anything goes”. A flash of blue amidst tangled seaweed might be a stinging bluebottle or a fragment of a baby’s rattle; a gleam of white, the side of an ice-cream container or a piece of nautilus shell. Crows step purposefully through dried seaweed, feasting on the shearwaters who have dropped dead from exhaustion, so near their destination after their flight from the Arctic Circle. Willy wagtails flick their tails this way and that, chasing insects attracted by rotting weed. Bits of ash and burnt leaves from inland bushfires or pellets of pumice stone from volcanic eruptions on the other side of the ocean trace out the highwater mark, joined by sauce bottles discarded from ships waiting to enter harbour. Creatures of sea and land, fish, bird, animal and insect, man-made objects, all are strewn pell-mell, not belonging yet belonging. This is a zone of coincidence, even in a scientific sense:

The shoreline is the only part of the globe where the four great spheres, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere or ocean, the lithosphere or earth’s surface and the biosphere all coexist.\textsuperscript{54}

It is a place where the apparently meaningless may suddenly acquire new relationships and reveal unexpected connections; where former oppositions and sharp-edged categories are reconciled, obliterated, or no longer apply:

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam. ...

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither, the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.\textsuperscript{55}

The title of a 1910 article about surfers, “Australia’s Amphibians”, hints at the potential for metamorphosis and transformation which is imaginatively realised in children’s fantasies such as \textit{A Dream of Seas}, \textit{The Secret Beach}, \textit{Beyond the Labyrinth} and “The Lifesaver”.

\textsuperscript{54}Short, \textit{Beaches of the NSW Coast}, p.7.
Thus the beaches along the coast define Australia’s margin: an apparently clearcut edge, a tangible boundary, but also an “in between” space, a site where disparity is accommodated and where creative potential resides.\textsuperscript{56}

If one descends from the heights of eagle and plane and contemplates the beach at ground level, what seemed so well-defined from above now dissolves into something indeterminate. As the authors of “The Beach” in \textit{Myths of Oz} recognise:

> the beach is an anomalous category \[a\ better word would be \textbf{ambiguous} - there are no anomalies in this zone of coincidence], neither land nor sea, but has some characteristics of both... zones are vague, the boundaries ill-marked, if not unmarked, and consequently the categories and their meanings leak one into the other.\textsuperscript{57}

This ambiguity affects even basic concepts which, in the context of the beach, become confused and indefinite. In \textit{Bombora}, when “Annabel decided she wanted to go in”, her intention was to go \textit{into the water}; but sometimes a swimmer will say “I’m going in”, meaning that they are going \textit{in(land)}, towards the beach. One boardrider will say to another “I’m going out”, meaning he is catching a wave to carry him to the beach or he is going out beyond a line of waves further \textit{out}, out towards the ocean. Because the beach is “neither land nor sea”, it is Janus-faced, looking towards and being both sea and land; thus Sanders perceives “two beaches, one looking toward the sea (‘closer to the body, to the drift’) and the other across the beach to the suburb and the city beyond”; while Bruce Beaver writes of

\begin{quote}
Two shores to walk, watching the beating waves
Of water on the one hand, earth the other;
To walk as fire in air, burning and burning
Between the all-consuming all-extinguishing
Waters of the earth, earth of the waters.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

As well as being ambiguous, the beach is unpredictable. It changes constantly as waves and wind shape the distribution of its sand, and tides rise and fall. The size of the waves and the direction from which they roll onto the beach alter according to

\textsuperscript{56}It has become common to write of \textit{hybridity} as the product of the creativity of the margin; but this is merely to create another category. I choose not to employ this term, preferring to leave the processes occurring in this fertile zone fluid, without closure.

\textsuperscript{57}Fiske, Hodge and Turner, \textit{Myths of Oz}, pp.59,60.
prevailing winds or forces generated by storms at sea. Visual evidence of flux is confirmed by rigorous scientific observation:

The surf changes from moment to moment, day to day, and beach to beach. The waves are influenced by the bottom and the bottom is changed by the waves. And since the waves arriving at a beach are highly variable in height, period and direction, each wave creates a slightly different bottom configuration for the ones that come after it. The water level changes with the tide and the waves change as the storms at sea develop, shift position, and die out again. The result is that the sand bottom is forever being rearranged. Even in glass-sided wave channels where an endless number of waves, each exactly the same, can be produced, equilibrium is never reached; the sand continues to change as long as the wave machine is running.

Thus the waves change the sand at the same time the sand is changing the waves.\(^{59}\)

The beach never is, is always becoming. It is always changing; but it is always there.

Accommodation of difference

When the significance of the beach as edge or margin is considered, a number of somewhat contradictory associations come to mind. There is the idea of edge as "edgy", of people "on the edge", unstable, ready to topple over into madness or chaos. We have seen that many of the characters in Winton's and Drewe's stories exhibit this in their temperaments or in their lives; they are not grounded or secure in themselves. There are aspects of their society which arouse some insecurity in Australians, as will be shown later. But many seem content to be on the edge or on the margin. The people on the beach exemplify this relaxed adaptation: there is an accommodation to other groups and interests, a sharing of territory which is reflected in the prevailing good humour of crowds in celebratory events. And amongst these crowds can be observed an informality of dress and an ease of bodily movement, both of which may be found generally in modern western culture, but may be augmented here by the unselfconscious freedom and sense of space experienced at the beach.

\(^{58}\) Beaver, "Seawall and Shoreline II", New and Selected Poems, p.30.
\(^{59}\) Bascom, "Waves and Beaches" p.470.
This judgment might seem to contradict the authors of “The Beach” in *Myths of Oz* who, as is their wont, focus on “clues to status and community role distinctions” within the beach crowd, citing the sociology of Cronulla Beach as revealed in *Puberty Blues*:

There were three main sections of Cronulla Beach - South Cronulla, North Cronulla and Greenhills...

That’s where the top surfers hung out - the prettiest girls from school and the best surfers on the beach. The bad surfboard riders on their ‘L’ plates, the Italian family groups and the ‘uncool’ kids from Bankstown (Bankies), swarmed to South Cronulla - Dickheadland. 60

It goes without saying that wherever people collect, some are more conscious of others - for example, young children of other young children, adolescents of those of the opposite sex slightly older or younger, the voyeur and the exhibitionist, and so on. The real question is whether sub-groups exclude others, whether subtly or blatantly; and Les Murray sums up both the appearance and the reality that underlies it:

That strip of sand fifty to two hundred metres wide is a whole world, with tribes and subcultures. It is a capital location of the Kingdom of Flaunt...That kingdom has its aristocracies and its hangers on, its castes and scavengers, and everyone knows how he must behave to enter it. To oppose it is to lose, and to ignore it is to be relegated to the margins of life. Or so it is believed in the Kingdom of Flaunt. In fact, the margins are very roomy, and receive nearly everyone in the end... 61

When Murray writes “nearly everyone”, he may be thinking about himself as the exception. He has written of his sensations as he, a large, bulky man, ventures back onto the beach where he endured agonies as a fat teenager:

Back, in my fifties, fatter than I was then,
I step on the sand, belch down slight horror to walk
a wincing pit edge, waiting for the pistol shot
laughter. Long greening waves cask themselves, foam change
sliding into Ocean’s pocket. She turns: ridicule looks down
strappy, with faces averted, or is glare and families.
The great hawk of the beach is outstretched, point to point,
quivering and hunting. Cars are the surf at its back.

You peer, at this age, but it’s still there, ridicule,
the pistol that kills women, gets them killed, crippling men
on the towel-spattered sand. Equality is dressed, neatly,
with mouth still shut. Bared body is not equal ever...  

It is a measure of Murray’s recovery from depression when he reports that he can appear on the beach now without feeling shame for the first time in his life. “I reckon I could do the length of Bondi beach now, without even thinking about it”, he says.

Generally people take it for granted that everyone belongs on the beach provided they don’t interfere with anyone else. This egalitarianism is one of the discourses discussed by Game: “Everyone is happy here, together. Social harmony is possible. This discourse is evidently a denial of differences.” One could argue that in fact there is not so much a denial of differences but a disregarding of them. This accommodation of difference is captured in Greetings from Sandy Beach, a children’s picture book which has gained such popularity since it was published in 1990 that it was one of four “children’s classics” featured in a set of Australia Post postage stamps in 1996.

Greetings from Sandy Beach begins with the family of two adults and two children preparing for a camping weekend at Sandy Beach. The story is told by the older child. At the campsite there are “people on motorbikes”:

They were called The Disciples of Death.
Dad didn’t like the look of them.
‘Don’t go near them’, said my Dad.
‘Stay away from them Gerald,’ said my Mum.

The Disciples helped a struggling Dad to put up the family’s tent:

Dad looked nervous and smiled at them a lot.

The weekend is pleasant and memorable, all the disparate campers gaining something from each other’s presence in a low-key fashion.

They all passed us on the way home.
First the bus, then The Disciples with their little white dog, his ears streaming in the wind.
'They were all right really’ said my Dad.
'Once you got to know them,’ he added, a bit further down the road.  

This ease of accommodation is highlighted if Australian beaches are compared with the delineation of territory which occurs on beaches in some other countries, as for example in the Chilean beach remembered from Isobel Allende’s childhood:

At ten in the morning, uniformed nannies would begin to arrive with children in tow. They settled down to knit, watching their charges out of the corner of their eyes, always from the same identical spot on the beach. The oldest families, who owned the grand houses, positioned themselves beneath tents and umbrellas in the precise center; to the left were the newly rich, the tourists, and the middle class who rented the houses on the hills; and at the extreme right were the day-trip hoi polloi who came down from Santiago in rattletrap buses. In a bathing suit, everyone looks more or less equal; every person, nevertheless, immediately recognized his God-given place. In Chile, the upper class tends to have a European appearance; as you descend the social and economic scale, indigenous features become more pronounced. Class consciousness is so strong that I never saw one person violate the defining boundaries.

Preference for ambiguity and open-endedness

Another important aspect of living on the margin, where the arbitrary throwing together of heterogeneous flotsam and jetsam precludes reliance on category and definition, is acceptance of ambiguity and difference, a preference for lack of closure and a resistance to boundaries separating one category from another. This is why Tim Winton, both in the ‘edginess’ of many of his characters and in his disregard of boundaries is a beach writer in a way that goes beyond the content of his fiction.

66 Isobel Allende, Paula, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, p.43. A recent SBS documentary on Chile showed that this has not changed: since lower class people like to take their picnics and eat on the beach, class segregation is maintained on the beach by the simple expedient of putting up notices on the more exclusive beaches, or parts of the beach, saying: NO PICNICS.
Other writers have also made this preference explicit. Janet Turner Hospital celebrates the freedom this lack of definition, this ignoring of boundaries, affords:

Something there is that doesn’t love a boundary line. In the medieval *Books Of Hours*, people step out of goldleaf miniatures and into the margins and sometimes right off the page...words put forth glowing tendrils...they swell and turn into griffons, dragons, creatures of glowing crimson and lapis lazuli that are neither fish nor fowl, text nor subtext, not fully on this page and not quite on the next.

These are my kin. They are always beckoning me to the mysterious space behind the word, between the pages, beyond the pale...Listen, they murmur seductively: rules are for transgressing, borders for crossing...Censors and critics alike overlook the margins. In the margins one is ignored, but one is free...

Who decides what is margin and what is text? Who decides where the borders of the homelands run? Absences and silences are potent. It is the eloquent margins which frame the official history of the land...⁶⁷

And David Malouf has stated that he “just loathes the whole world of distinctions and categories...I don’t believe in those distinctions between nature and man, men and women, body and soul; I don’t believe in any of those dichotomies on which a lot of culture is based”.⁶⁸

Such tendencies operating in the general population may account for some negative reactions to the concept of multiculturalism where it is perceived to encourage identification with particular ethnic categories rather than leaving such matters unresolved. They are also consistent with the construction of a relatively harmonious lifestyle among people from a myriad of different backgrounds and lifestyles and the achievement of compromise, despite no-holds-barred rhetoric, which historically characterised industrial relations in this country. The sociologist Claudio Veliz claims that:

...Australia is generally, and correctly, regarded by the rest of the world as an exceptionally law-abiding country with an unequalled history of peaceful and successful domestic arrangements...Australian society and its polity have not only proved themselves able to withstand the imperfections and asymmetries of diversity, but have evidently thrived and prospered because of them...an original and pragmatic arrangement whereby sovereignty, power

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⁶⁷ Hospital, “Litany for the Homeland”, pp.414-415, 418.
and responsibility are efficiently shared by centre and periphery, without conflict or rupture, in a manner as successful as it is unprecedented.\(^6^9\)

Reflecting on this judgement, it is interesting to study the cartoon shown on the next page. The postures of the onlookers are revealing. They are lounging, reading, enjoying the sun or the shade, but have modified their relaxed positions to indicate that they have noticed the Hitler figure. They do not encourage him by assuming attitudes of alert attention, however; nor do they cluster or move towards him, which would be to allow him some authority or power. They show a politeness which is very characteristic of Australians in public gatherings or performances: even where they disagree with a speaker or wish he would go away, they do not hiss him or boo him off the stage as others might - after all, if they wait a little while, the tide will rise to wet his boots and he'll move on. Are they indifferent to the problems of violence and evil in the world? Or is it simply that the ranting of fanatics loses its power to persuade as it is dissipated into the sky and the sea above and beyond? What is illustrated is a laissez-faire attitude, a courteous refusal to engage with what is distasteful or extreme.

It can and will be readily pointed out that Australia has a xenophobic and racist history, a sorry record of discrimination and prejudice against Aboriginal people in particular. But Sydney University anthropologist Ghassan Hage argues on the basis of his fieldwork in western Sydney and elsewhere that the racist/non-racist distinction is mostly a futile one, and that many Australians are racist and non-racist at the same time\(^7^0\). While being somewhat mystified as to the reasons why, Stephen Knight concludes that

For many odd reasons Australians might be summed up as being one of the most racially tolerant, in an offhand way, of the peoples of the world. When Geoffrey Blainey made statements about Asian immigration... It was as if Australians were forced into a debate where they were uneasy... [they] would have preferred a decent silence on the matter... private views that many were


\(^{7^0}\)Quoted by Peter Cochrane in "Race Memory", in *The Australian's Review of Books*, October 1996, p.30. It should come as no surprise that people's attitudes and emotions are often complex and contradictory.
VII: A cartoon, untitled, by Spooner (see page 218)
willing to mutter to each other [they] were not able to countenance as a specific and voiced structure of values. 71

Knight also notes the preference for the anti-heroic, for remembering military failures over military successes which Turner analysed (see chapter one), but views such tendencies more positively than Turner:

much that is valuable in Australian society stems from the strange uncertainty. The virtue of nationalism here is its vagueness... Consoling and destructive simplicities about the nation seem largely to be resisted in Australia. 72

Knight refers to the “contradictory and often curious patterns” of Australian culture, summing up:

That inner contradiction of the national character, its sensitive soul behind the squinting mask, has given Australian society for long a paradoxical quality... 73

Jan Morris writes in a similar vein of Sydney, the birthplace of twentieth century Australian beach culture. Rejecting a glittery image of Sydney as “far too explicit”, she sees it as “tantalisingly ambivalent...not one of your absolute cities”:

I was looking perhaps for the black-and-white, sharp-edged resolution that usually characterises showy young towns of ambition, and all I found instead, I thought, was aloofness and introspection. 74

To these observers, seemingly contradictory realities jostle each other, like flotsam and jetsam on the same stretch of beach. Andrew Taylor expresses this contradiction, and the impossibility of resolving it, in “Hydrotherapy...(for Brian Matthews)”:

The Australian custom of sitting in a ring still puzzles me. Thousands of Australians sitting in a ring and looking inward - not at their souls but at others in front of them, including those on the other side of the ring who are looking in at them. How weird!

71 Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, p.123, p.115.
72 Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, p.121,122. (Which is why changing the Constitution is so difficult!)
73 Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, p.6.
I grew up on the beach, where Australians, true watery Australians, face out to sea. Our coast is guarded by watchers on cliffs, jetties, sand, or floating on fibreglass waiting for Japs, Indos, Boat People and the next big wave. From Cairns to Perth from Portsea to Broome, they are back to back.

So when Australians exhibit this circular and inward obsession, I’m worried. The enemy could be crawling up our cliffs hijacking trams at the St Kilda terminus and trundling towards the Arts Centre and Chloë. There might be nasty surprises in the carpark when those inward Australians look for their Toyotas.

And when they leap to their feet and shout and then half sit down in despair while the rest keep cheering and grin beatifically at the utter strangers beside them, I reckon they have only two minds, constantly changing, and should all be taken by bus to the beach, although it’s winter, and asked to swim.25

**Liminality**

The beach is a threshold, a liminal place. Here one is “on the brink”, between the two great worlds of land and sea, in a space where one can remain frozen and irresolute, or from which one can choose to move decisively into one realm or the other. Here one can pause while deciding to remain in a present situation, retreat to the past or step forward into the future unknown. Metaphorically, it is a place of transition between one stage of life and the next. Australians unconsciously respond to this liminality by enacting many of life’s significant moments there.

Robert Drewe discovered that every Australian he knew had had his or her central physical and psychologically important events occur on or near the coast:

> Emotionally, they discover or lose themselves on the coast...most have their first sexual experience on or near the beach...For the rest of their lives, the beach, the coast, is not only a regular pleasure, a constant balm, but an idea fixe, an obsession that surfaces and resurfaces at each critical physical and

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25Taylor, in *Sandstone*, p.42.
emotional stage...Australians make or break romances at the beach, they marry and take honeymoons at the beach, they go on holidays with their children to the beach, and in vast numbers retire by the sea.60

Friends and families measure off the milestones of their lives against their annual reunions at beach houses or camping spots.

The literary record readily confirms the impression that the beach is often the place where significant things happen to people: Lucinda Brayford, with Lucinda’s memory of the beach at the Tarpeian Rock; recognition by Laura and Voss of their affinity at the beach picnic in Voss: the final meeting between Joss and Sybil in Bones; Rachel drawing back from crossing the threshold, from ending her relationship with Frank in The Chiming of Light; Miss Harcourt’s “letting go” of Jim in Fly Away Peter and Georgia’s readiness to go on with life after mourning her father’s death in Truce - and so on. What is clear is that the beach is gradually becoming a major site of significance for Australian culture.

The emotional significance of the beach is often private and particular, less often a place where collective meaning is celebrated; but rituals are developing nonetheless. A kind of greeting/commiseration gesture can often be observed at popular beaches - a shared smile or laugh as someone just entering the surf gasps or winces at the shock or the pleasure of cold water meeting warmed body. People visiting a beach for the first time walk from one end to the other, mapping it through the soles of their feet. Boards tucked under arms, surfers trot across the sand as if impatient to meet the waves. There is also a baptismal ritual: a young mother or father, sometimes both together, will lower their baby into the water at the edge of the surf. Gently and gradually the baby is introduced to the water, the parent watching the baby’s face and body in order to monitor and enjoy the baby’s response; and if it is positive, if the baby squeals with delight rather than shock or fear, the parent walks further into the water, the baby becoming accustomed to the movement and depth.

In a society whose public spaces usually have the effect of excluding or ignoring them, there is a privileging of children at the beach: the edge where the waves meet

60Drewe, “Tidal Pull”, p.41.
the sand is by common consent ceded to them. Adults walking along the beach or heading into the surf thread their way among sandworks, among small children dancing to and fro through the advancing and retreating wave edge. Young adult males boisterously engaged in vigorous activities like beach football or throwing frisbees swerve away from the edge of the waves to avoid the children. Two things are happening here: the right of children to exercise their capacity for both pleasure and industry is accepted and encouraged; and a civilising process is at work, whereby children are being inducted into an aspect of their culture.

At the other end of life, many choose to have their ashes scattered off the headland of their favourite beach. The scattering of ashes symbolises the crossing of the boundary between life and death, and possibly reflects a growing ability to accept the fact of our own death and to temper our fear of it - an ability which, according to Dinnerstein's argument, is strengthened by our capacity to take joy from the moment and to live in the here and now. As has been shown, many writers link ideas of death and loss with the beach. Evidence of cultural change in this direction can only be impressionistic; a recent article by Paola Totaro, the daughter of Italian migrants, is of interest in this respect. She explains that death is taboo in her Italian family, and describes her apprehension as the funeral of her friend's father is arranged. Joining them after the funeral at their mother's house, "ready to speak in whispers amid tears and horror" she is "astounded" at how much happiness is mixed in with the tears:

He had lived, he had loved, been loved and he had died. Simple as that.

The next day the mourners travel to the Catherine Hill Bay cemetery.

The moment Jack's coffin was lowered into the ground, there was silence. Just the wind and the crash of the surf below.

Afterwards, another gathering. Totaro concludes:

Not once did I witness the terror I had always associated with the concept of death itself...I've come to realise that it is not possible to truly understand a new culture until you immerse yourself in its most intimate moments, the profound events, those that are interlaced with the rituals of life and
death...his loss gave me a new understanding of Australia, its people - his family - and death itself.  

A moving example of the spontaneous incorporation of the beach into a memorial ceremony following a tragic event occurred at the end of 1996 in Gracetown, a small surfing town on the south coast of Western Australia. Nine members of the community, five adults and four children, were killed when a sand cave beneath which they were sheltering as they watched a surfing contest collapsed and fell on them. An official ceremony was held a few days after the disaster at Huzza’s, the section of Cowaramup Bay where the ill-fated surfing competition took place.

In a regal procession of black wetsuits and white boards, they [surfers] slipped into the water and paddled their boards into a circle around a group of family members.

They rose together on the gentle swell...Then came their cheers of release, echoed by the hundreds [the crowd was put at more than 5000] lining the steep steps up to the carpark.

They held hands, threw flowers, lumps of seaweed, even a surfboard, with delight. Surfers emerged from the water exhilarated, all saying it made them feel better to have celebrated the lives of those who had loved that patch of water so much...the rituals seemed to bring the mourning into a new phase.

A number of these themes come together in a simple piece by Robert Dessaix, a contribution to a collection of responses for a magazine cover story entitled “The Best Year of their Lives”. Dessaix found it impossible to isolate a particular year, finding instead that his mind identified “favourite moments”:

I’m writing this in a house on a deserted cove on Kangaroo Island. The beach a few metres away is almost pink with dried-out kelp, and at this time in the evening there’s a dribble of pink from the sky spattering the rockpools and the shallows as well. Out on the point there are cormorants hunched like dabs of ink. And looking out on all this, I realise I have had a hopelessly irregular life. It hasn’t settled into years. I can’t just rummage around in it for a favourite one.

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78 West Australian, 4 October 1996, p.5. A “wake” on the beach is described in “The Cabaret Dancer’s Funeral” from Matthew Condon’s A Night at the Pink Poodle. Among the mourners who have stripped to their underpants and gone into the surf, is the white horse, the deceased’s partner in his cabaret act: “There he was, swimming amongst them, thrashing those fine pins under the water, nostrils flaring...His pink feathers, though a little damp, stood out like a beacon against the green waves.” (p.168). In Bombora, the family go to Maroubra beach after Madeline’s funeral.
So, with one eye on the cover and one on the small, white coffin-shaped box of Haigh’s peppermint creams at my elbow, what comes to mind is that this very moment, as I write these words, is as good as perfect. 79

In a characteristically graceful and oblique way, in Dessaix’s description of the box of peppermint creams as “coffin-shaped” he alludes to his awareness of his incurable illness: appreciation of the joy of the moment, acceptance of inevitability of death, coming together in the beach setting.

Ross Gibson has described Australia as:

meagrely historicised. Every plot of earth, every spike of spinifex hasn’t accrued a story, hasn’t yet become a sign in the arbitrary system of meaning which is history. 80

The beach in Australia is “accruing stories” accumulating meaning in a way that is not easily recognisable by those who would link cultural and spiritual significance with that which has been built, farmed or cultivated. And Australians are constructing an archetype of the beach, a shared element of their culture, through their common experience of the beach.

The marking of events and moments of significance at the beach relates to the sense of the numinous noted in works discussed in the previous chapter. Such events and moments may constitute what could be described as invitations to spirituality in a society which has often and persuasively been described as “determinedly secular...unspiritual”. 81 The historian Patrick O’Farrell writes that “In Australia...what is most significant historically about religion is its weakness, its efforts to achieve some strength, its tenuous and intermittent hold on the minds and hearts of Australian people, its peripheral or subordinate relation to their main concerns”. 82

79 Dessaix, “The Best Year”, p.17.
81 Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, pp.13, 16.
In what may be a search for spiritual meaning, Australians have, as Knight notes

a fascination for an unpeopled landscape that verges on the mystical...For white Australia, communion with nature in this country is a means of non-communication with the former owners of the land; the ecological movement, so strong here, is a movement that prefers no people at all...It’s not that more magic is needed in the Australian people, but that more people are needed in the Australian magic.\(^{83}\)

In the literary examples given in the previous chapter it is the peopled beach which provokes apprehensions of transcendance, even if the peopling is by a solitary figure: the surfer observed by Miss Harcourt in \textit{Fly Away Peter}; the gold of Gillian’s body and the slap of the water as she dives in \textit{Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing}; and the meditation stimulated by memories of the narrator’s father after the scattering of his ashes in \textit{Truce}.\(^{84}\) It is as if the immensity and timelessness of nature stands at one pole of meaning and the precious fragility and ephemerality of human existence at the other, each drawing significance from the other.

It may be the case that the search for spiritual nourishment in solitary wilderness is misguided. There is food for thought in a notice in the Visitors’ Centre at Strahan in Tasmania, where thousands of tourists take cruises up the wild Gordon River to gaze at the silent primeval forests which loom over its banks:

Wilderness...is imagined as the profound opposite of much that we find repugnant about our modern world: natural as contrasted with artificial...spiritualism as against materialism. But rather than addressing humanity’s divorce from its soul, this idea of wilderness simply reproduces it.

Perhaps this idea of wilderness is inadequate, and what we need are new ideas - of something as valuable because it means something to us...Such a step will only be possible when we cease to regard wilderness as something separate from ourselves.


\(^{83}\) Knight, \textit{Selling of the Australian Mind}, pp. 19, 20.

\(^{84}\) Though not in the case of the wholly alienated Sylvia in \textit{Spilt Milk}.\)
Knight judges that “nothing of any force emerges from the white encounter with that potential mythscape”\(^8^5\) and suggests that we might instead be developing a quasi-spirituality out of a meretricious consumerism:

> The empty spaces of Australian supernatural experience are steadily being filled...by the cartoon imps that sell us soap or by the insistent magic of the gift shows...The great churches of our culture, lavishly decorated and tended by huge staffs, are the enormous city stores, as exotic, bemusing and effective as any cathedral or dreaming place.\(^8^6\)

The materialism which has characterised the culture since the early days of settlement, now embraces not just the accumulation of money but the spending of it. Yet to the extent that Australians are imbuing their beaches with human meaning, they have embarked on the beginnings of healing the split in their lives between the mundane and the spiritual. The battle for the Australian soul is not over yet.

This chapter has suggested that “subtle and elusive” features of Australian culture are related to the beach experience, and that the beach is a site of spiritual significance for Australians - a perception shared with Meaghan Morris: “had he [Stephen Knight] spent more time at the beach, he might have learned something about spirituality in our ‘secular’ society (most Australians, I think, are pantheists)...”\(^8^7\) The characterisation of Australians as “determinedly unspiritual” is a premature judgement. While Australian spirituality, and the crucial role of responsiveness to nature in its definition, lacks form and expression as yet, works by writers such as Charles Birch, David Tacey and Paul Collins indicate that this task is beginning to be addressed.\(^8^8\)

The next chapter goes on to propose connections between the beach and important themes and patterns in Australian life and history.

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\(^8^5\) Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, p.19.
\(^8^6\) Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, pp.23-24.
CHAPTER SIX

INFLUENCES OF THE BEACH IN AUSTRALIAN CULTURE II: HISTORY, WORK AND PLAY

Poverty prevented me from thinking that all is well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history is not everything.¹

Interweavings

The place where I live now is a home unit - not the house on a quarter-acre block which has traditionally been the childhood or family home of most Australians. Yet the space around the block on which our building stands is quintessentially Australian in at least two important respects.

This is "beachfront land": I step through a gate in the fence onto a long curving strip of sand where the surf endlessly crashes, and from my window I can watch boardriders carving the swells in their water ballet; people walking along the beach parallel to the fringing waves; or solitary figures standing still and facing the rising sun as if in prayer or meditation.

If I turn my back on the beach and look out towards the road, there is a grassy central traffic island where, screened by wind-warped teatree so that one hardly notices it is there, stands a memorial to those who gave their lives in Australia’s wars. There is the flagpole, stone steps leading to the altar-like monument of granite on which are inscribed in gold-leaf lettering:

In loving memory of those who died
And appreciation of all who served
1918-1918
1939-1945

¹Albert Camus, quoted in Drew’s introduction to The Picador Book of the Beach, p.5.
Korea, Malaya and Vietnam are also there in brighter gold, indicating their more recent addition.

These two spaces - the beach, the war memorial - represent two of the drives identified by Dinnerstein: the desire to live in the senses and for pure joy of the moment and the desire to be part of history, to prove our worth to the denizens of the real world over the other side of the equator.

When Europeans settled in Australia, they entered a land apparently bereft of history. To many of the colonists, the Aborigines were prehistoric; at best, they seemed to live in an a-historical vacuum. In his apologia, The Beauties of Australia (1838), William Woolls admits

It is a remark frequently made by persons who have immigrated to New South Wales, that this colony is not only devoid of any venerable remains of antiquity, but that it also is deficient in those interesting scenes which contribute so much to enliven and dignify the histories of other countries... It is true that we cannot boast of the massive structures which have been raised by the picy of our forefathers, and which are now the sacred storehouses of our predecessors, and guardians of their bones: we cannot pride ourselves upon the triumphal arch, the high-raised battlement, the moated tower, and the mouldered grandeur of days gone by; nor can we lead the traveller to the contemplation of those glorious fields on which tyranny and oppression fell beneath the sword of patriotism. We are not famous for the gigantic pyramids which were reared by kings whose names are now unknown. The lofty column and the lengthened aisle do not grace our shores. We have no plains of Marathon, no pass of Thermopylae, on which we may feel an honest pride: nor are our towns decorated with the trophies of ancient victories, and the headless busts of heroes long forgotten.

but he argues that Australia presents other "objects of interest to persons of a refined taste":

She may, indeed, be poor in works of art, but she is rich in those of nature. Instead of splendid piles and glorious triumphs, she can boast of her clear Italian sky, her woolly flocks, her vine and fig...  

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²William Woolls, "the Beauties of Australia", in Penguin Book of 19th Century Australian Literature, pp.16-17.  
³Woolls, "Beauties of Australia", p.17.
For many, these attractions have been insufficient compensation for a sense of being left out of history-making, an asset which was the prerogative of nations of the Old World, "up there" in the Northern Hemisphere. If we look at early photographs of crowds on the beach, it is notable how many people stand looking directly out to sea. On the edge of the continent they look outwards, over the horizon. One interpretation of this orientation is to suggest that, as migrants crowd the deck of the ship for the last glimpse of their homeland, so Australians, mostly descendants of Europeans exiled as far from their homeland as it is possible to be, cut off by the vast oceans, huddle on the edge and mourn their isolation. "To Go Overseas" has for generations been the ambition of young Australians. The immensity of the sky over the empty horizon becomes a tabula rasa onto which can be projected one's hopes, expectations, the belief that things are better, brighter, more interesting "over there". Hence our deference to "overseas experts", our desire for travel, our avid interrogation of travellers arriving on our shores, our enthusiastic adoption of fads and fashions from overseas, and the departure of so many of Australia's writers and intellectuals to live and work abroad. Goodall writes of the period 1890-1930:

Many of the people who might have formed the cultural avant-garde of Australia left the country, spending long periods overseas...or in many cases not returning at all. The phenomenon of expatriation is one of the most striking in the period. Over one-third of Australian Rhodes scholars never returned to their native land.6

Such an observation would have been close to the truth during most of our history. Phillip Drew in The Coast Dwellers asks: "Is Australia really so unlovable that we need to run away to travel, for an education, to see relatives, to fight in wars, to get ahead? It seems that almost any excuse will do".6 But is it just the unlovability of Australia that drives the impulse to leave - or a more fundamental attraction to something we sense that overseas will be able to provide? As wars break out in the northern hemisphere, young men from all over Australia eagerly join the call to arms, seizing the opportunity to

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6A kind of "hemispheric" fallacy - the notion that the map of the world is naturally read from top to bottom, Old World on top, the southern hemisphere below, with all the consequent connotations and evaluations.
6Goodall, High Culture, Popular Culture, p.100.
participate in battles being fought in distant countries which are only names, over causes of which they have little understanding.

How do we explain such a response? C.E.W. Bean, Australian war correspondent and historian, acknowledged the mixture of motives which drove men to enlist in the first World War:

All the adventurous roving natures that could not stay away, whatever their duties and their ties; all those who plunged heads down into war, reckless of anything else, because it was a game to be played and they were players by nature; all those who had been brought up on tales of old British adventure, and who, seeing the mother country of their romance in peril, could not remain still for a moment until they were in the thick of things; all those who could not refrain from taking life in strong draughts, both the good and the bad of it; all those whose tender upbringing had bred in them the exalted British standard of service which is to be constantly found, in a degree which some would deem quixotic, in good Australian homes; old soldiers of the British regular army...; hundreds of those newly-arrived younger men who knew the old country as the land of their childhood...: Irishmen with a generous semi-religious hatred of the German horrors in Belgium; all the romantic, quixotic, adventurous flotsam that eddied on the surface of the Australian people concentrated itself within those first weeks upon the recruiting offices of the A.I.F.⁷

Dinnerstein's history-making drive - towards engagement in "memorable event", "durable achievement" - is none the less powerful for being unconscious and implicit in those more readily analysed motives. It was as if Australians sought to legitimate their claim to membership of western civilization by joining its long procession of noble warriors; having, as Gerster sardonically noted, "somehow atavistically inherited the transcendent qualities of the legendary Trojan battlefield so tantalisingly close to Gallipoli itself".⁸ George Johnston wrote in similar vein of the soldiers as "throwbacks to the earlier golden time when gods and men walked the earth together".⁹

Even for those with no aspirations to the heroic, the lure of historic circumstance could prove irresistible. Jim in David Malouf’s *Fly Away Peter* spends all his time birdwatching among the dunes and is content with his life. But World War I is declared, those around him join up with alacrity, and

> It was as if the ground before him, that had only minutes ago stretched away to a clear future, tilted in the direction of Europe, in the direction of events, and they were all now on a dangerous slope... Jim felt the ground tilting, as he had felt it that first day in Brisbane, to the place where the war was, and felt the drag upon him of all those deaths. The time would come when he wouldn’t be able any longer to resist. He would slide with the rest. Down into the pit...

Soon Jim bows to the inevitable, enlists, and waits to be sent overseas.

> If he didn’t go, he had decided, he would never understand, when it was over, why his life and everything he had known were so changed, and nobody would be able to tell him. He would spend his whole life wondering what had happened to him and looking into the eyes of others to find out.

Jim enters a new world of mud, blood and confusion. But even as he endures all the horror around him, Jim senses that being human involves the knowledge, if necessary through first-hand experience, that such things are possible:

> Jim saw that he had been living, till he came here, in a state of dangerous innocence. The world when you looked at it from both sides was quite other than a placid, slow-moving dream, without change of climate or colour and with time and place for all. He had been blind.

This “dangerous innocence” is shown in sharp relief in a particularly moving scene in the film *Gallipoli*. The troopships carrying Australian soldiers have arrived in Anzac Cove and, waiting for the invasion to commence, the soldiers respond to the transparent sea around them by shedding their uniforms and diving into the water. It is a scene of innocent delight as they frolic in the sparkling water, engaging in the horseplay so often enjoyed at home - they are only boys. Then suddenly, the shock, the disbelief, as bullets rain down and the clear, pure water becomes discoloured with blood.

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12 Malouf, *Fly Away Peter*, p.103.
The film does not tamper with historic reality in this scene. Bean wrote:

"...the salvation of the troops [was] sea-bathing. From the day when first a section of the troops was withdrawn from the line to rest, bathing became the one officially approved recreation."

In his straightforward way and from a soldier's point of view, Albert Facey in *A Fortunate Life* recalled swimming at Gallipoli as the only enjoyable moments of an otherwise terrible experience:

When we were resting we were allowed to go down to the beach and have a swim, but only near headquarters. The beach nearest to our position was within range of Turkish snipers and would have been too dangerous. The bay was continuously under shell-fire but this didn't worry us because we could hear a shrapnel shell coming and would dive under the water just before it exploded.

We used to go on the swimming trips a section at a time under the command of a sergeant. We enjoyed them very much and were able to get ourselves clean.

Bean describes these incongruous scenes in his more expansive style:

Many of the Australians who were accustomed to sun-bathing in their seaside resorts at home, and those whose business was in the Cove quickly discarded their shirts, amusing themselves with an informal competition to become "the brownest man on the beach"...by midsummer their skins were in many cases tanned darker than those of the occasional Turkish prisoners. When the struggle of the Landing had subsided, the Beach on summer days reminded many onlookers of an Australian coastal holiday-place...in the water the hundreds of bathers, and on the hillside the little tracks winding through the low scrub, irresistibly recalled the Manly of New South Wales or the Victorian Sorrento...

Such relaxation became more and more valued as the campaign dragged on, despite ever-present and escalating danger from the Turkish snipers:

In June the bathing became so popular that the beach took on some of the appearance of a health resort. On June 20, for example - a drowsy midsummer Sunday - 404 men were counted at one time either in the water or sun-bathing, and many more sitting half-dressed, browning their backs or dressing or

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undressing. The result was that about this date those of the enemy’s guns which
normally shelled the Beach began to be frequently turned upon the bathers...
Birdwood, although this fact was represented to him, refused to interfere with the
bathing... he was convinced that the recreation was of great moral and physical
value to the troops. The bathing continued, in spite of frequent bombardments
and the consequent casualties, from the Landing until the Evacuation. 16

The men in the photograph reproduced on page 233a could be any crowd of vigorous
young males “skinny-dipping”, throwing a ball about and generally enjoying the water;
but these are Anzacs, men who have just returned from the trenches, and their innocent
enjoyment seems unbearably precious and moving in its horrific context.

Bean had described the enlisting men at the beginning of the war using a maritime
metaphor: “all the romantic, quixotic, adventurous flotsam that eddied on the surface of
the Australian people”; he went on to paint these memorable word pictures of men at
play in the midst of war. And it is worth noting that Bean, for all his propensity to draw
on bush imagery and ideology in his descriptions of the soldiers, and his disparaging
remark that “true Australians are nurtured in the bush, not among the sea-beaches and
soft breezes of the coast” 17, did more than any other writer to establish as the
quintessential Australian war legend the story of the Anzacs at Gallipoli - a battle fought
on a beach. Bean was passionate about the significance of the campaign:

Though the expeditionary forces of the two Dominions were only in their
infancy, and afterwards fought with success in greater and more costly
battles, no campaign was so identified with them as this... In no unreal
sense, it was on 25th April, 1915 that the consciousness of Australian
nationhood was born. 18

But his account really begs the question: what was it about this particular campaign
above all others that crystallised this nascent “consciousness”? In its theme of stubborn,
brave endurance against hopeless odds, Gallipoli echoes and reinforces the bush myth of

17 John Thornhill, Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation, Newtown, NSW: Millenium
stoic resistance which Turner has analysed in terms of its ideological significance,\textsuperscript{19} but any number of other battles exemplifying these same qualities could have been the subject of legend. Undoubtedly the \textit{primacy} of Gallipoli was an important factor: it came early, before enthusiasm for the war as a noble cause had been eroded by the bitter realities of casualty, suffering and stalemate. But it is also possible to suggest that the focus on the beach at Anzac Cove had something to do with the significance it soon acquired and maintained.

With its curve of sand and the tracks winding down the sandhills through low heathy shrub, this was a beach like the beaches already familiar to Australians; and so for the those at home as well as the soldiers themselves, there was a connection, something to be recognised in the otherwise unimaginable (or romanticised) “theatre” of war. There was a kind of symmetry, too: when the Australians landed on the beach at Anzac - another “fatal shore” - as part of an invading force, they were also asserting their right to participate in events of significance in the real (northern hemisphere) world - a world their ancestors had relinquished when they invaded the Great South Land by landing on the beaches there nearly one hundred and thirty years earlier (though acknowledgement of \textit{settlement-as-invasion} was firmly repressed into the national unconscious at this time). When they were forced to remain “on the edge”, as attempts to advance were repelled, they occupied a zone which was not enculturated. Just as the beaches in Australia resisted appropriation and cultivation, so the beach at Anzac bore no obvious stamp of Turkish civilization. In the months they were there, the Australian soldiers impressed their identity on the beach, as the beach itself constructed their identity as Anzacs, in a way that was not possible where battles occurred in the interior, on the “native land”, of the countries they helped defend. And the beach was a war/no war zone, acquiring the features of a “health resort”, “a coastal holiday-place”, at the same time as it remained a site of “frequent bombardment”, “shellfire” and “casualties”. It thereby manifested the ambiguity which which has been identified as one of the key aspects of the meaning of the beach. On the beach at Gallipoli, two very different modes-of-being-in-the-world coalesced and clashed.

\textsuperscript{19}See Chapter One, pp.27-28.
In creating the legend of the Anzacs at Gallipoli, Bean had drawn heavily on "The most enduring myth of the Australian national character...the populist figure of the bushman".\(^{20}\) He wrote that

> The Australian was half a soldier before the war; indeed throughout the war...the Australian soldier differed very little from the Australian who at home rides the station boundaries every week-day and sits of a Sunday round the stockyard fence... in general country life produces a much better soldier than city life.\(^{21}\)

But towards the end of his *Official History*, Bean had to admit that the figures were against him: only 57,000 out of 350,000 who had enlisted gave "country callings" as their occupation,\(^{22}\) and among the city soldiers, lifesavers were well represented.

Lifesavers and soldiers were seen to share many of the same qualities - of egalitarianism:

> ...for the most part the wealthy, the educated, the rough and the case-hardened, poor Australians, rich Australians, went into the ranks together unconscious of any distinction.\(^{23}\)

> Members are drawn from all grades of society and the surf club is a great leveller.\(^{24}\)

There was also continuity in the tradition of standing by your mates:

> So far as he [the Anzac] held a prevailing creed, it was a romantic one inherited from the goldminer and the bushman, of which the chief article was that a man should at all times and at any cost stand by his mate. This was and is the one law which the good Australian must never break.\(^{25}\)

> Sportsman and saviour, he is seen by many as a survivor from another age when there was pride in self-discipline and mateship.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{20}\)Goodall, *High Culture, Popular Culture*, p.88.


\(^{24}\)Philip, *Sixty Years of Swimming and Surfing*, p.61.


And, as Ed Jagger points out, a similar “larrikinism and deliberate flouting of authority.”

As the war faded into history and the lifesaver took over from the soldier as a type of national hero - moreover, an urban hero appropriate for a nation whose population increasingly lived in the suburbs of its cities - the ethos of the individual bushman and his loyalty to his mates broadened into an ideal of community service. There is a continuity in this regard for service to the community as the highest good which is interesting to note. For all Gerster’s contempt for the promotion of “the Digger” as the exemplar of heroic racial characteristics by Australian war writers, I would argue that the most widely remembered heroes of the first and second world wars respectively are Simpson and his donkey, from Gallipoli, and Captain Edward “Weary” Dunlop. Neither is revered for feats of daring in the heat of combat, but in Simpson’s case for rescuing the dead and wounded without regard for his own life; in Dunlop’s for his care for his fellow prisoners-of-war in the camp at Changi, far from the lines of battle. A recent incarnation of the hero Australian, the bushfire-fighter, maintains the continuity of this ideal. And in respect of the lifesavers, it is summed up by Maxwell, who writes of the lifesaving clubs that they foster:

...a spirit of selflessness, of chivalry, such as is found in no other sporting movement in all the world today, not counting the cost when a life is for the saving.

The warrior aspect of the lifesaver-hero is implicitly acknowledged in descriptions such as “Samurais [sic]” and the titles of books about lifesaving: Gladiators of the Surf, Surf: Australians Against the Sea; A Challenge Answered...: The Guardians of Our Beaches. Parallels are explicitly drawn: Maxwell quotes a tribute to a lifesaver turned soldier, and recognises the link between training for lifesaving and for war:

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28 Maxwell, Surf, p.302.
29 Russell, “Australia’s Amphibians”, p.263.
Continued on next page
''Dos Wallach's record as a soldier [he gained the Military Cross] may not at first appear to have anything at all to do with surfing'', writes one who knew him well. ''But it is possible that the qualities of courage and endurance which enabled him, and so many Australian men of his generation, to win the name of 'Anzacs' were strengthened first in the strenuous and often dangerous game of 'shooting the breakers' he played every weekend at Maroubra''...They [lifesavers] made good soldiers, good sailors, grand airmen. They fitted easily into service life, took drilling in their stride, and the disciplinary vigour of the most case-hardened sar'-major left them unshaken, they who had qualified for their Bronze Medallions under the lash of club instructor's tongues.31

Philip asked rhetorically:

Cannot the work of Surf and Life-Saving Clubs be compared to any army: one is trained to save the life of the individual, the other to fight for his country? Is the comparing of the March Past illogical? The true test of both is on their different fields of battle...32

The “different fields of battle” seemed to merge on a memorable day at Bondi in February 1938 which became known as “Black Sunday”. The drama of the event is worth recounting in some detail. It was a very hot day with a vigorous surf. In the morning the high tide and rough sea kept most people from venturing in too far. Recognising potential trouble, the surf club captain had the patrol on duty bring down extra reels to the edge of the surf. As the tide fell, hundreds moved further into the water onto a sandbank. In mid-afternoon several large waves swept everyone off the sandbank into a deep channel and the surging sea:

31Maxwell, Surf, p.40.
32Philip, Sixty Years’ Recollections of Swimming and Surfing, p.96. Most recently, it seems that the mantle of warrior-hero has been passed on to the boardriders, the surfing champions. In Busting Down the Door: the Wayne “Rabbit” Bartholomew Story (HarperCollins, 1996), the story is told of how in 1978 the Australian surfer Bartholomew was beaten up by Hawaiian rivals stung by the success of a cocky outsider who seemed out to “steal the last vestige of their heritage – surfing”. Tim Baker noted that “That whole story is a really proud but largely overlooked chapter in Australian sporting achievement in its finest tradition, the whole Anzac spirit of battling against all odds. The Australians going to Hawaii is not a million miles away from jumping out of the trenches and running into gunfire. It’d be great if the Continued on next page
Some two hundred bathers were in serious trouble; mothers were crying for their children, people were shouting for help. Several beltmen raced into the sea, taking advantage of the extra lines, but their efforts to bring assistance...were hampered by the panic-stricken swimmers who were fighting for their lives just beyond the edge of the bank. Dozens gripped the line...Every line came in with ten or twenty people clinging to it. Luckily many Bondi clubmen were on hand that afternoon...They snatched up anything that would support people in trouble...The clubmen began bringing in drowning victims, one by one. In a short space of time the beach resembled a battleground, with bodies everywhere being given the resuscitation that would give life back to most...the resuscitators formed into relays, relieving each other as the strain became too much...

The final tally of dead was five...No awards of merit were ever made to individuals...The club-men had functioned as a single life-saving unit.33

An American doctor who was on the beach that day commented at the inquest:

This rescue business is a labour of love, the like of which the world cannot show anywhere else.34

Today the lifesaving movement still flourishes but its glory days are past, many rescues now being performed by the boardriders who spurn club discipline. In its heydey it was indeed “a labour of love”,35 with its participants achieving a felicitous balance between, or a reconciliation of Dinnerstein’s “joy of successful activity”,36 - the satisfaction to be gained through “the effortful achievement of purpose”37 - and the taking of pleasure in the moment which the beach represents.

Attachment to the beach and its delights has often been seen as antithetical to a serious commitment to work - a temptation to indolence and to the evasion of challenge. Yet if

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33 Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p.60.
34 Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p.140.
Dinnerstein is right, pleasure such as the beach can provide should *enhance* and *supplement* the indirect and incomplete compensation that enterprise can legitimately, feasibly offer in exchange for the early magic of the body: the pleasure in exercising our talents for cerebration and complex effort, and in using our power to make at least some things happen.  

While work, or enterprise, cannot *substitute* for “the direct recapture of...erotic intercourse with the surround”, there is a “direct primary pleasure” in intellectual work, and it is an *erotic* pleasure in that it involves “the enjoyable exercise of a physiological capacity”. Dinnerstein thus accords intellectual activity an instinctual, healthy status:

In trying to make enterprise carry this *unfeasible* compensatory burden, we forfeit the only possible chance we have to help it carry its *legitimate* compensatory burden, which it cannot carry alone. In this way we poison, in turn, the direct primary pleasure it provides: the pleasure of erotic use of the higher central nervous system. ...For us, conceiving a purpose and going to the trouble to achieve it is the enjoyable exercise of a physiological capacity, just as soaring is for a bird or burrowing for a rabbit; it gives us pleasure as straightforward as the pleasure of lovemaking, or looking, or listening...this pleasure induces us to act in ways that turn out to keep us alive.

Are there connections between “conceiving a purpose and going to the trouble of achieving it”, “the pleasure of erotic use of the higher central nervous system” and the “direct recapture of erotic intercourse with the surround” experienced at the beach? The answer to such a question is inevitably subjective; but if the beach is narrowly construed as the very edge between land and sea, the moving fringe where the waves swell and crash foaming onto the sand, then it is likely that most would answer in the negative. The body’s interaction with the dynamic matrix is almost totally physical, an occasion of sensation rather than cerebration.

To the extent that one moves away from the zone of perpetual motion, however, motives more akin to work may come into play - the word “play” being appropriate here, as

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38 Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p. 145.
39 In contrast to Brown, who regards psychopathology as the central source of intelligent effort (Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, p. 143).
40 Dinnerstein, Mermaid and Minotaur, pp. 145, 146, 140, 141.
Dinnerstein’s “pleasure gained from the effortful achievement of purpose” is suffused with the playfulness which characterises the beach experience – a playfulness of mind as well as body. It is no mere coincidence that Sir Isaac Newton summed up his life of scientific inquiry and achievement in the image of a child on the beach:

To myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.\(^{41}\)

Recalling this statement of Newton’s, the historian Jacques Barzun argues that

Out of man’s mind in free play comes the creation Science. It renews itself, like the generations, thanks to an activity which is the best game of \textit{homo ludens}... Science is play because of the very meaning of free inquiry: not this or that urgent result, but \textit{laisser faire, laisser jouer}.\(^{42}\)

This quotation from Barzun in its turn recalls the words of the theologian Jacob Boehme referred to in the Introduction to this study – that the “inward divine man [should] play with the outward in the revealed wonders of God in this world, and open the Divine Wisdom in all creatures.” The implication is that an element of play is integral, rather than antithetical, to genuine intellectual activity. Yet as Brown saw in Life Against Death, the two are more often seen as opposites, “the antimony of work and play”.

For children at the beach, this antimony is erased: purpose develops out of play as those infinitely plastic materials, sand and water, are used in a setting free of imposed demands and expectations. They build and decorate elaborate and extensive sandworks with an energy and singlemindedness of purpose worthy of an engineer, builder or architect absorbed in a favourite project. As the tide comes in and washes away constructions which may have taken hours to build, other lessons are learned: of the fragility and ephemerality of human achievement; and of how to relinquish gracefully the products of one’s labours when these have been superseded or destroyed:


Castles and moats
safety on a grand
scale of sand
seaweed floats

like drowned hair
children ignore
the hollow
of waves' throats

in their despair
as summers sink
moats and castles
tattering parcels

of sunburnt hopes
flattened by a lick
of sea and air.43

Some adults find that the beach is not only compatible with but even facilitates focussed intellectual activity:

In my experience, the beach is a place that allows greater contemplation, as well as no contemplation at all. It is a very cerebral place; it allows you to focus on certain matters and think of nothing else; and its honesty encourages clarity of thinking.44

For many, reading on the beach - a cerebral activity, if sometimes not a particularly demanding one - is part of the enjoyment of being there. Don Anderson noting that the cover of an issue of The Times Literary Supplement devoted to Australia featured Anne Zahalka’s 1989 painting The Bathers, asks rhetorically:

What is missing? What is the absence that speaks louder than the wild waves in Dombey and Son or off Bondi? There is not a book in sight. And we the nation with the highest per capita book-buying habit in the world.45

Perhaps Anderson is suggesting that there is a connection between “the highest per capita book buying habit” and the popularity of the beach, and that in portraying one without the

44Drewe, “Tidal Pull”, p.41.
other, a stereotype of mindless activity is perpetuated, one which distorts reality. For visitors and newcomers do often suspect that enjoyment of the beach is inimical to sustained intellectual effort. John Douglas Pringle in *Australian Accent* complained:

> It is, as I know by experience, a hard thing to read or write after a day spent in the dazzle and thunder of the surf. Everything seems to discourage intellectual effort in a nation where intellectual effort has never been highly regarded.  

But Knight, another Englishman (of Welsh parents), who lived here longer than Pringle had when he wrote those words, perceives things differently:

> Australians have constructed a culture which is remarkably intellectual... Australian life offers rich evidence for the existence of a vigorous, responsible and self-generating intellectual sphere [despite the fact that] its actual intellectual virtues have been unexpressed and set in the shadows of the simplistic Aussieramas of popular wisdom.

These contradictory judgments suggest that first impressions can be misleading, and that the relationship between work, intellectual effort and the enjoyment of the beach is not a simple one.

When one is swimming “off the beach” the obsessive focus on fitness or performance which is encouraged by the constraints of a narrow pool built for swimming laps is attenuated by the unpredictable swell of the waves and the overwhelming presence of sea and sky, perhaps to be replaced by playful reverie, a sense of one’s smallness in the scheme of things. And in the pools sculpted into rock platforms at the ends of beaches, the manufactured component of built walls is dominated by the natural surround of sea, beach and sky, sand and shells. While the pool wall may seem a solid barrier to the sea, it is an illusory boundary, for at high tide the waves wash over it and swimmers’ bodies undulate in the swelling water. Sue Hailstone reflects on the access that swimming in such a pool gives her to a “special, inner place”:

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45 Don Anderson, “Strange Results when Foreigners Pick our Teams”, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 1993, p.9A.
I know that I can never leave myself, but when I swim I reach that special place in my mind, when my mind wanders off into a sort of unwitting daydream; there are no boundaries about it so I can just go or be or think, those thoughts can be random...I find that quite nourishing. It's interesting that it happens with physical activity that involves all of my body...I sometimes feel that I'm more free to go to my special [inner] place when I am moving or doing or walking or swimming; that because I am moving freely, maybe I think more freely...

In the end, the most obvious connection between the beach and the world of history-making and enterprise is the beach's capacity to re-energise us in its "fountain of play and erotic exuberance" when we are exhausted by that world:

Something miraculous happens, thinks David, when you dive into the surf at Bondi after a bad summer's day. Today had been humid and grim, full of sticky tension...He'd had professional and private troubles, general malaise and misery pounding behind his eyes as he drove home to his flat...He was still bruised from his marriage dissolution, abraded from the ending of a love affair and all the way up William Street the car radio news had elaborated on a pop star's heroin and tequila overdose. Then in New South Head Road it warned that child prostitution was rife and economic depression imminent. Markets tumbled and kids sold themselves...He'd have a swim.

The electric cleansing of the surf is astonishing, the cold effervescing over the head and trunk and limbs. And the internal results are a greater wonder. At once the spirits lift. There is a grateful pleasure in the last hour of softer December daylight. The brain sharpens. The body is charged with agility and grubby lethargy swept away...He feels that he could swim forever.

Urban beaches like Bondi facilitate the interweaving of work and play in the lives of many who go there. This interweaving is illustrated in a popular children's picture book, *The Tram to Bondi Beach*. The picture on the title page is a double spread of people at the beach; but the next page, the first page of the story, shows people in trams on their way to work. The story tells of Kieran's induction into the world of work as a paperboy on the trams. Kieran and his sister play in the surf at the beach, but the focus of the story is on Kieran trying become a better paperboy, coming into conflict with a rival, then eventually befriending his rival and selling papers in a new spot, on the beachfront.

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48 Hailstone, "The Special Place".
50 Drewe, "Stingray", in *The Bodysurfers*, p.158. The next moment David feels "an explosion of pain in his right hand: he has been stung by a venomous marine creature". That’s life!
Kieran’s pride in his work and his ambition have developed in the context of the beach life which is portrayed in delicately beautiful drawings.\(^{51}\)

The beach is the place for a morning dip or jog on the beach before going to work; it is close enough for a quick swim at lunchtime or between shifts: “Lunch break surfers surf in and out”,\(^{52}\) “time out” can be taken between work and home by surfing at the end of the working day. The beach is not separate, a place for holidays remote from the workaday world, but very much part of it. Ease of access to the beach encourages the achievement of a dynamic balance between work and play, a place where people can be observed “stealing ecstasy from the monotony of their workaday lives”\(^{53}\) - an idea which is reflected, with a sting in the closing line, in one of Bruce Beaver’s poems:

\begin{quote}
It is that hour of the early evening
when the time-pressed clerks
and the shop-girls drift wanly
homeward, another day worn off
their lives by an egregious friction
of wasted hours rubbed together
in a time-clock’s steely bowels.
But the day itself has been so
fair, and is now; so bright
and laced by exquisite breezes
I imagine the people running
through the effervescent shallows
or lazing on the wide, glowing
sands, or trailing fingers in cool wavelets, the hair blown
back, the eyes filled with blue
vistas and the golden light
of the sun coins spun through
the deep air, or sitting on shaded
balconies that face the fading
cast or aspiring west, both satisfying
the dreamed of well-being only the
habitually exploited can imagine.\(^{54}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{52}\) Meg Stewart, “Beachstruck on Bondi”, in *Bondi*, p.42.
The question of how far a balance is achieved in the lives of most Australians as far as history-making is concerned is more problematic. A hunger to go overseas, to be involved in the ‘real’ world where history is made, is evident. Australians still go to the other side of the world to participate in other people’s wars. In peacetime, we are driven by a great curiosity about the rest of the world, a sense that it provides experiences and truths which are not available here, and we travel widely. We still feel a need for achievement, fame and fortune to be validated by overseas recognition.

Knight has recognised a link between Australia’s “successful but anxious” society and “the source of disturbing silence” that is our history. Meaghan Morris also comments:

Peter Sutton suggests one source of indifference to Aboriginal people is our own history of assimilation and amnesia, growing up post-war without a sense of ancestry or tradition, or any cultural means with which to miss such things. Faced with immemoriality, we are sceptical. Deep down, we suspect it’s a scam.

Modern Australian history began on the beach, where two vastly different cultures briefly overlapped before their withdrawal into mutual incomprehension and violence. The picture on the next page shows a fleeting, fragile moment of rapprochement, as sailor and Aborigine dance together on the beach; but such moments of engagement were all too rare.

As the tide washes from the beach the signs of commerce and disturbance from the day just past, so it seems that much that has happened here has been erased from our consciousness - particularly with regard to our convict past and the history of Aboriginal-settler contact. One consequence of such amnesia is insecurity about the capacity for, and even the criteria for successful history-making. To the extent that we confront the past and grow in our understanding that history has been and can be made here, so we will become less dependent on overseas experience and overseas affirmation for a sense that we too are participants in humanity’s history-making.

Knight, Selling of the Australian Mind, p.6, p.8.
Re-discovery and re-examination of our past is only beginning, and is fraught with controversy; but one can hope that the wiping away of memories of the past represented by the waves on the beach might in the future be replaced by a more constructive representation: that the mistakes of the past can be remedied, and that as the tide leaves a smooth stretch of sand ready for new possibilities, and unexpected treasures are perhaps cast up by the ocean, so we can make fresh starts, new beginnings. Mudrooroo Nyoongah expresses hope, sadness, bitterness and pity as past histories interpenetrate the present and each other in his poem “Beached Party”:

We all, all of us must have a beginning, a birth day,
I, we died a thousand, thousand,
When Governor Phillip carried to terror nullus
His ill cargo: “I suffer, suffer –
Why exile me here?”
Convict, warder, soldier, thieves –
The ruin of a hundred, hundred futures
Snuffed out – hurt: “When we came,
We found you!” - no platitudes, please –
Do we march, progress to the sound of the drum
Thrumming out a present tomorrow of yesterdays,
Or to surf fumbling over sun-drenched bodies
Seeking releases in different genres of progress,
While lamenting over the Empire’s thick arms
Softening at the sacrifice he offers to this our future
Emblems of Gallipoli and betrayals in Greece,
When we discover that we have founded a nation
And there are no more trips back to the old country.
Now we belong and aren’t we glad to be home
In the Aussie way of slightly doing things –
Clichés - don’t rock the boat, consensus falters
As we glance over our bodies and stare at Australia
Where a tree is nurtured, not dismantled into the wood chips
Of our provincial selves exported to where we can’t understand
The by ways and the ironies of us as a holiday destination.
This space for sale, better to ignore the worst
Betrayals and accept the present thinking of
Belonging as the celebration imprisons our injustices
And we linger on an eternal holiday under an eternal sun
On an eternal beach where all problems are TV-framed
Foreigners flickering in constant battles for victory and control,
While we naked and somewhat ashamed yell:
Advance Australia Bronze into the history of our future
Marked each day by Governor Phillip holding
the shattered body
Of a Koori in his white arms slowly turning brown
Under a hot sun saddened with the defects of the cold
Icing an ancient land saddened with the defects of the new,
As on this day, I finger the scars of my sorrows, and smile at
The droppings of my tears while holding the boat steady
As Governor Phillip proffers gifts;
Then the musket speaks to place in his imperial arms
The sacrifice necessary to found this, our new nation
In mourning each and every year on this date,
As indifferent skins blister with cancerous growths,
And my voice whispers a hopeful, happy birthday, Australia,
While daubing sunscreen cream over the worst lesions
of my past. 57

Christina Stead saw more than sixty years ago that for Australia to become our genuine homeland, in order to savour living here, we will have to come to terms not only with the land, its fauna and flora, its unique place in the world, but also with the “native youth” whom we dispossessed.

Recent arrivals and future challenges

It is clear that recently arrived migrants and their children have not been subject to the influences that have been described here, and that the beach for many of them may have an entirely different set of meanings, or very little meaning. As Paul Collins recognises:

Their spiritual and cultural lives still dwell in the old country, and their emotional sustenance is still drawn from the culture they left behind...
Identification with the new country, with the ecological and spiritual aspects of that country, takes time - even generations. 58

Some make this journey of identification more quickly than others, so attitudes to the beach can provide an interesting scale of assimilation. 59 Renate Yates, daughter of Viennese refugees, writes of her parents’ arrival at the beginning of World War II:

57 In Spectrum, the Sydney Morning Herald, 19 January 1991. This poem was commissioned for Australia Day as part of the Sydney Writers’ Festival and is donated to the Mitchell Library archive.
58 Collins, God’s Earth, p.180.
59 I use the idea of assimilation in its Piagetian sense: of a psychological process whereby new material is taken into an existing scheme or system, as the original scheme or system changes and accommodates to

Continued on next page
For my parents Bondi was a tremendous disappointment. Where were the outdoor restaurants, the tables under colourful umbrellas, the waiters waiting to serve them ices; where were all the imaginative and beautiful settings of the summer resorts they had left behind...They found the sand too hot and the surf far too rough for swimming.

It was an alien, uncomfortable landscape. They infinitely preferred [the harbour beaches] to the ocean beaches as did many of the Reffos then, and so many of the migrants now...

In later years, as they became acclimatised, they did turn more to the ocean beaches. Perhaps for a change or because their surfing children demanded it.60

Ross Gibson quotes a poem by Max Dunn:

The country grows
into the image of the people
and the people grow
into the likeness of the country
till the soul’s geographer
each becomes the symbol of the other.61

On a beach excursion, some high school boys jumped into the water or explored the rock pools; but a knot of Asian boys knelt on a broad ledge of rock, engrossed in a game of cards. They seemed oblivious of their surroundings, the rock ledge existing for them only as a table for their cards. Months later, another group of lads of similar appearance played cricket while on a beach picnic; in their movements, their knowledge of cricketing rules and terms, and their accents, they were indistinguishable from any other cricket-playing group of youngsters. Clearly they were much further along the scale of assimilation than the first group. I have also observed the beginnings of the process of “growing into the likeness of the country” in numerous gatherings of recently-arrived families on picnics at the beach. Often they sit tightly huddled together on the grass and not the sand; to a degree they hold themselves apart; but the process has begun. And for some it happens quite quickly and easily:

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the new material - the two processes always and simultaneously occurring. Thus, as migrants are assimilated into the host culture, the host culture changes to assimilate them.

Over the Christmas break I travelled to a piece of paradise on the south coast of New South Wales. There, frolicking on the splendent white sand and ripples of the deep blue-green sea, were some 300 people. I guess about 50 to 75 of them were Asians (Indians, Chinese, Vietnamese).

I didn’t see any of them eating with chopsticks, they played cricket and touch footy, and some of the younger ones had deep Australian accents. Some were partnered by Anglo-Australians.

For a brief moment I wondered if my letter-writing condemning Hansonism was not just an embarrassing waste of time: all there seemed oblivious to the current troubles. Maybe it was a temporary illusion... 62

That open-ended conclusion, that note of uncertainty, are characteristic responses, appropriate in face of a future which holds many questions and challenges. The global reach of commerce and telecommunications, the mass media, ease of travel, mass migration, all lead to an increasing deracination of individuals, a growing number of people from whom the contribution of attachment to place to their construction of personal identity is potentially diluted. For some, the consequent anticipated decline of nationalism and the rise of a consciousness of world citizenship is welcome: Salman Rushdie, for example, celebrates “Melange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and that, [this] is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world...for change-by-fusion, change-by-co-joining. 63

Others will argue that love of the planet and of mankind is but a pale abstraction unless it is built on a foundation of an early and strong commitment to local neighbourhood and community. Certainly we are engaged in history-making now willy-nilly; just as children inevitably grow up, so changes in our own society as well as international developments present us with challenges requiring our engagement. This will make it impossible for us to yield to the impulse to live only for the pleasure of the moment, a temptation recognised by D.H. Lawrence:

Would the people awaken this ancient land, or would the land put them to sleep, drift them back into the torpid semi-consciousness of the world of twilight?\textsuperscript{64}

Some of the qualities in Australian life which are postulated in this study as having developed in association with the beach are identified by Gibson as those which will serve us best in the uncertain future, and which can most usefully be highlighted as we adopt new views of ourselves:

Once the Pacific setting of Australian history is brought to the fore, fluidity and mutability rather than stoic, reactive intransigence can be proposed as a communal tendency.

From the 1820s onward, Cartesian authority imposed itself even more decisively, and agricultural wealth burgeoned as the colony turned its attention inland. But underneath this groundplan, bubbling through like a history from below, something fluid and shifting had already installed itself. Something fundamental and oceanic, a mercuric capability... let’s just wonder if it was something that can still be summoned, like a legend of experimentation, to guide us now into the ways of invention and improvisation required by the great social and philosophical changes of today.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{64}D H. Lawrence, quoted in Tacey, \textit{Edge of the Sacred}, p.201.

CONCLUSION

The bush gained significance early in our history. Writers were of crucial importance in constructing the bush and rural life as the quintessence of Australian identity – our earliest and most influential myth of place. In current jargon, the bush was a "unifying discourse", a perceived reality to which Australians in general could relate; the people took unto themselves the writers' version of Australianness. The beach became part of Australian life in the early part of the twentieth century - a much more recent contributor to the people's image of themselves. Even when its briefer history is taken into account, however, writers have not played a prominent role in the process of incorporating the beach into interpretations of Australianness, in articulating a new myth of place which relates more closely to contemporary Australian life. Here the people have led the way: in a sense, the writers have gradually come to the party instead of inviting the people to the party, as in the case of the bush.

Reference to "the party" seems appropriate when one contrasts the image of the Australian as dourly resilient - the image of the bushman – with more recent characterisations of Australians as feckless pleasure-seekers. Brian Matthews recognises that our sustaining myths – of the bush, of Gallipoli – are insufficient, that "we have no legend based on the way we do live and have always lived, as an urban coastal people." He asks: "Why not a coastal myth for Australia?", but answers his own question in a way that supports Dutton's judgment of the beach's "bad" literary image:

...the trouble with a beach as against a bush legend is that the beach is about leisure, hedonism, pleasure, indolence. It does not provide those Protestant/Puritan values of endurance and back-breaking work towards achievement and prosperity.

This may be yet another case of "Thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant." Hedonism, a philosophical commitment to pleasure as the highest good, cannot be inferred from the behaviour of people on the beach; there is no way of knowing whether other values have as high or higher priority in their lives. Nevertheless, the influence of the unfavourable stereotype associated with the beach - of vacuous

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minds in sunburnt bodies – is evident, even in a writer like Peter Blazey (whose own lifestyle suggested no personal aversion to pleasure):

Forget Gallipoli, the outback, and the Aussie battler and other tedious wowser myths from our Anglo-Irish puritan past; the essence of being Australian is, regrettably, something much more sensual. It is to lie on warm sand under a carcinogenic sun watching other bodies walking or lying and then to ritually clean yourself in the ocean. Why “regrettably”? Brown criticised Freud for his metaphysical bias towards dualism, and this criticism is apposite here; for the thinking which underlies Blazey’s choice of that word derives from the construction of another set of antagonistic opposites - enjoyment of the moment versus commitment to work, to history-making, or to engagement with others. Capacity for enjoyment of the beach is compatible with - indeed, often conducive to - the “effortful achievement of purpose”. It is clear that these drives identified by Dinnerstein and Brown, as they are exercised with reference to the beach, need not operate separately from or in conflict with each other. The nuances of their meeting, merging and interplay, the ways in which they are balanced and reconciled, enrich and add complexity to the lives both of individuals and of the society in which they have their being.

The beach has become popular in an era which has come to emphasise cultural diversity rather than unity; where appeals to unifying discourses, or unifying symbols, are criticised as glossing over differences or as disguises for political or ideological agenda. But a society whose members share no common experiences or values is a society - a commonwealth - no longer. To the extent that the beach remains a common resource and a common site for the meanings explored in this study, it contributes to the fragile network of bonds which holds a people together.

The experience of the beach resonates with other patterns in our culture. Attitudes to the body and to sensuality, to life and death, to work and to enjoyment, to time and to history, all are affected by the experience of the beach. And in its contradictory and ambiguous connotations, the beach serves as a metaphor for the paradoxical quality of human existence.
This dissertation suggests that some of our deepest psychological needs are assuaged by contact with natural phenomena, and that a culture reverberates to aspects of the natural environment in which it is set. Such arguments may seem to be on shaky ground in an age when talk of cyberspace and virtual reality supports the view that geography is increasingly irrelevant to human society. Yet that very phrase - on shaky ground - is a reminder that we are physical beings in a physical universe. A need for contact with the natural world may even be inbuilt. Some scientists have suggested that desire for sight of the colour green, the colour of the vegetation which clothes the land masses of the planet (where they have not been blasted by manmade or climate-induced desertification) is wired into our nervous systems. Robert Drewe writes in *The Drowner* of a happening based on historical fact, in the goldmining town of Kalgoorlie during a "water famine":

Suddenly the hotel’s billiard rooms were thronged with players day and night, men queuing in the street who had previously never held a cue, men attracted to billiards because the baize was the only greensward they would see.  

In the same novel we encounter a child with Angelman syndrome, an actual medical condition named after its discoverer. Those who suffer from it have an overpowering desire to throw themselves into water - indeed, into any liquid they see, whether real or represented:

In her obsession, a bowl of brown Windsor soup equals the Indian Ocean for excitement. She tries to climb into seaside picture books, into illustrations of streams and ponds.

Perhaps many of us carry within ourselves a trace of the Angelman syndrome. Perhaps the idea that we can plan for a future where humans re-design the natural world to suit themselves is a late twentieth century manifestation of *hubris*, and we would sicken and die in an environment entirely of our own making.

Matthews writes that "we have no legend based on the way we do live and have always lived, as an urban coastal people (though this may be evolving)". The beach

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4 Drewe, *The Drowner*, p.298.
manifests cyclical aspects of existence: the waves which advance and retreat; the
tides which rise and fall twice daily; the variations associated with annual changes
from mid-summer to mid-winter; and the destruction by, and gradual restoration of
beaches after, storms. In this respect it reflects what Eliade has described as “sacred
time”\textsuperscript{6}, which flows in a closed circle, with eternal return to the sacred and the real -
a feature of the worldview of Australia’s original inhabitants, but one of which
modern Western culture has little understanding, and with which we feel
uncomfortable. We prefer the drama of linear narrative, legends of adventure and
achievement. But the recurring rhythms of life, the repeating patterns and rituals of
human existence, enrich and bring significance to our work and history-making, and
need to be recognised and honoured.

The superficial semiotics of the beach-as-exploited-by-consumerism masks the deeper
reality of the beach as a place conducive to apprehension of the transcendent and the
spiritual. Our experience of the beach is now complex, rich and multilayered, an
archetype ripe for literary and artistic transformation and illumination. The
mythologising of the beach is a continuing process in the minds and hearts of many
Australians; the future will show how this process is reflected and affected by
Australian writers.

\textsuperscript{5} Matthews, “New Urban Myths”. p.15.
\textsuperscript{6} Mircea Eliade, \textit{The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion}, translated from the French by
APPENDIX A

AUSTRALIA'S BEACHES

Australia is an island continent bounded by a coastline which is about 36,700 kilometres in length. In a sense, it can be said that Australia is a nation contained within a beach¹.

The great oceans - Pacific, Indian and Southern - which roll onto the edge of the continent meet a shoreline consisting of three main types of feature: rocks and cliffs; beaches and dunes; and mudflats and tidal plains. The distribution of these features is shown in Figure 1.²

While every beach is unique, beaches along one part of the coast may differ in a general way from those in another region. Figure 1 divides the continent and its surrounding oceans into climatic regions – temperate/tropical; arid/humid; however, because politically Australia is a single nation, it is often easier to refer to the characteristics of beaches belonging to the various states and the Northern Territory.

Figure 1 shows that beaches occur along most of the coastline in the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. This is also the part of the continent which was first settled by Europeans and has the highest population density. About sixty per cent of the New South Wales coast (975 kilometres) consists of 721 sandy beaches ranging from long sweeping beaches up to 26 kilometres long to small, deeply embayed beaches only a few metres in length. The waves of the Pacific Ocean roll unimpeded as surf onto the ocean beaches all the way up the coast to Queensland’s southern beaches. The Tasmanian coast also, except in the south, is mostly comprised of beaches.

Figure 1: Map showing distribution of beach honeysuckle Australia's coastline.

- TROPICAL ARID
- WARM TEMperate ARID
- WARM HUMID
- TROPICAL HUMID

Population:
- Sparse population
- > 0.3 person/km

Coast types:
- Rock coast
- Beach and barrier coast
- Tidal plain coast
In the tropical waters of North Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, coral reefs form a barrier protecting the coast from the full force of the ocean waves, so they have no surf to speak of, except in cyclonic weather. Saltwater crocodiles may inhabit these tropical beaches; and, at the hottest times of the year large numbers of deadly poisonous box jellyfish are carried towards the beaches, rendering them distinctly uninviting to humans.

Along the south-eastern coast and on the coast of Tasmania the beaches are often short — their average length in New South Wales is just over a kilometre — and contained between rocky outcrops, steep cliffs or headlands. In other places — the Gold Coast of southern Queensland, the Eighty-mile beach of north-Western Australia, Ninety-Mile beach in Victoria, and in South Australia — many beaches present a long, barely curved line of sandy dunes to the oceans.

Defining a beach

What is a beach? It is a wave-deposited accumulation of sediment, usually quartz sand grains together with other minerals and rock, shell and algal fragments, and sometimes cobbles and boulders. The sand of the beach rests on bedrock geology, and the beach itself extends from the upper limit of wave swash (the broken wave spending itself as it spreads over and sinks into the sand, reaching furthest at high tide or in stormy weather) out across the zone of surf to where the waves begin to move the sediment towards the shore.

While the headlands enfolding the beaches are composed of rocks millions of years old, the beaches themselves are only about 6500 years old. The coastline at the height of the previous Ice Age some 10,000 years ago was some 20 to 60 kilometres offshore, to be gradually submerged as the icecaps melted and the sea rose to its present level.
For historical reasons which are explored in this study, the quintessential Australian beach is here defined as a surfing beach - that is, one which faces the open ocean and where waves build in height before crashing as breakers onto the sand. Because most of Australia’s continental shelf is steep and narrow by world standards, its ocean beaches (where unprotected by reefs) are typically pounded by waves more active and vigorous than those found on many other coastlines – particularly those of Britain and Europe. Sandy beaches without surf are located in sheltered bays and inlets such as Sydney Harbour; sandy stretches of riverbank are also sometimes also thought of as beaches. These places possess attributes of beachness to a greater or lesser extent depending on how closely they approach the qualities of the ocean surf beach.
APPENDIX B

LAWS RELATING TO BEACH LAND IN AUSTRALIAN STATES

NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation, May 1997:

Most of the New South Wales coast is Crown land and the responsibility of a variety of State Government departments although there are small strips which are in private ownership (freehold) or owned by local government (Community or Operational Land).

Queensland Department of Natural Resources 7 August 1996:

It is assumed that the term “beach” you refer to is the area between low and high-water mark and the area directly adjoining landward of the high-water mark. In general, most of the areas would be in State ownership in the form of unallocated State land (Crown land), Reserves, National Parks and in some instances, roads.

Some areas have previously been granted by the State as freehold to the then high-water mark. With the passing of time many complex legal problems have arisen as to the boundaries of these original grants having regard to erosion and accretion. As a result, this has complicated the actual ownership of some “beaches”.

... no easily obtained data is available to enable an accurate estimate to be made of the area covered by State owned land and land granted by the State as freehold.

S.A. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, 31 July 1996:

1 The original letters from which these statements were taken are in the possession of the writer, except in the case of New South Wales, where the extract given, from Volunteers working on the Coast: A Guide to help Volunteers working on New South Wales coastal Crown Land, NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation, May 1997, p.4, confirms the substance of an earlier telephone conversation with an official of that Department.
There are no private beaches as such in South Australia. When the first survey was done a 100 link reserve was established along the entire coastline. Surveyed roads were provided at intervals to allow access to the reserve.

I am unaware of any law that gives inalienable right of access to the coast in Australia. Erosion over time has resulted in a diminishing of the coastal reserve in some areas to the extent where now some of the coast to below low water mark is in private ownership. When access to the coast has been denied in South Australia, the Coast Protection Board, in some cases, has purchased land in order to restore it.

**Tasmania, Land Titles Office, 7 August 1996:**

Upon settlement of Tasmania, all land, including beaches, was deemed to be the property of the Crown at common law.

It is not the case that beaches are inalienable. If land abutting the seashore is granted by the Crown, the common law sets the boundary at the mean high water mark... At common law the Crown can expressly reserve seashore above the mean high water mark when granting land abutting the seashore...The property in the soil of the seashore below the mean HWM belongs to the Crown and does appear to be inalienable, however the public retains a right of navigation over it.

...the actual ownership of any given strip of beach in Tasmania is not always certain...title would need to be searched to determine ownership of beaches where land abutting the seashore has been granted.

**Victoria, Office of Surveyor General, 5 August 1996:**

There are definitely private beaches (i.e. beaches held in title) along the coast. However, the number of these private beaches is relatively small. Very few Crown grants along the Victorian coastline alienated land to the water’s edge. The vast
majority are separated from the coast by a Coastline Protection Reserve or Public Purpose Reserve.

If a Crown grant issued with an abuttal shown as “Southern Ocean”, “sea coast”, “Coastline”, “Bass Strait” or any such working indicating that it extended to the coast, then it is deemed that the deed/title to the land extends to High Water Mark. The abuttal is considered to be the prime determining factor of the land’s limitation. Specific measurements colourings or delineations shown on the grant do not take precedent over such an abuttal.

The doctrine of gradual and imperceptible erosion and accretion also applies to seacoast boundaries but sudden natural or artificial changes do not alter the deed/title position...

Western Australian Department of Land Administration, 16 August 1996:

In W.A., Crown land has been alienated to the high water mark, however the majority of beaches are Crown land. Privately held land extending to the high water mark is limited to along the south west coast. These grants are not numerous and were restricted to the early years of settlement. This practice was not common, the majority of land grants fronting on the ocean were and still are limited by boundaries set 40 metres back from the high water mark. Land between these boundaries and HWM is vested in the Crown. In cases where private land extends to HWM, the section of land (beach) between HWM and low water mark is also vested in the Crown.
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