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Confessions of a Littoralist

Beyond the Beaches and Waves in Australian Dreamings

Abstract: In my 2020 poem 'Confessions of a Littoralist', I declared: "The coast, not the bush, calls me | despite the smell of gums and the yellow of winter wattle … | We Australians are littoralists, | people of the coast, the shoreline, | the space between hills and water. | [While a few swim, surf or sail and the] | sea is a part of a collective unconscious | [for me] the water is touched lightly, | by slightly sandy, accidentally salty, feet | We need the shores of our dreaming, | but dreaming does not demand diving in | Or even getting wet". Over eight generations, the settler-invaders' world evolved between coast and mountains. In sprawling suburban cities, the water is often far away, and many, including me, feel uncomfortable in water. Our dreaming was shaped by footy ovals and indigenous and exotic suburban gardens. Despite Isolated Country Syndrome, worldly awareness is engendered by port cities, trade and immigration. A different side is parochial ignorance and fear. One cultural result is the other sea theme, the odyssey or journey, the 'Big Trip', once back to London and Europe, then Asia, now New York, which I addressed in the poem 'Innocents Abroad' – "We came by boat | Last of a generation".

I am a Littoralist, someone always living on the shore, which recognises the Latin origins of the term 'littoral', a word rarely used in English, although a normal usage in French. Perhaps my subject is twofold: shorescapes rather than seascapes in my personal experience; and the many connections of a nation of coastal dwellers.

I am, like most Australians, not a person of the 'Bush', certainly not the Inland, even as I am also entranced by the smell of wet eucalyptus, the yellow brightness of wattle and the passion of the reds and pinks of the bottlebrush.

The story I will tell, with feet happily on the terra firma of suburban grass, the sand of a beach or the wooden floor of a cafe, is of course quite different to other engagements with water and the oceans. It contrasts with Indigenous interactions with water, especially in northern Australia, and with the 1988 Indigenous beach protests against the invasion re-enactment in the form of a 'First Fleet' arriving from the sea.[1] It differs greatly from traditional engagements with the sea (fishing, yachting and rowing, swimming, surf lifesaving and swimming) and from new ecofeminist readings of human interactions with other species in the ocean.[2]

Typically, I am an urban coastal dweller with feet firmly planted on solid ground, from bitumen roads and footpaths to veggie patches and gardens and to the green grass of backyards, parks and sporting grounds. I am a product of Hobart, the smallest of the seven port capital cities, even as I lived between city and bush, or as in the Cadbury 1920s advertisement, "between mountain and sea", between Mt Wellington (with its Napoleonic war resonances for a city founded in 1803-1804) and the Derwent River. In fact, my childhood water was the local creek. In Australia, I am drawn to Coogee beach and the rockier charms

1 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Fiona Nicoll: We Shall Fight Them on the Beaches, pp. 149-160.
2 Rebecca Olive: Swimming and Surfing in Ocean Ecologies, pp. 39-54.

of Bicheno. As an international traveller, I am drawn to the vistas delivered by rivers and beaches, from the Moselle to the Loire, from Biarritz to Nice, from Sicily to Japan's Kamakura. During pandemic lockdown in Melbourne, I visited the nearby Moonee Valley Creek and Maribyrnong River, for even Port Phillip Bay was beyond my allowed 5-kilometre radius.

Water was even more calming within the experience of the lockdown as I wrote about sitting by the creek in this short poem:

Sitting on my rock by the creek
With apologies to Otis (Redding)

Sitting on my rock by the creek
Grass and shrubs behind me
The afternoon sun sneaking through the gum leaves,
Doing business on the phone
Or just dreaming,
in a moment of escape
from our pandemic lives

Personal history from childhood shapes us. May I note here that this is a personal account of the relationship with water and seascapes and one which also explores art and writing. A more formal academic analysis of specific subjects such as the changing relationships of Australians to the beach or the history and experience of swimming, surf-lifesaving, surfing and surf clubs may tell a different story.

Pursuing the personal and the artistic I won't fully address the 19th century contradictions regarding the sea and leisure: the early popular appeal of rowing, but limited interest in leisure or competition swimming, the costume prohibitions of Victorian puritanism, and the retreat to baths, bathing enclosures on the coast. Nor will I address the political economy story as depicted in Frank Broeze's 'Island Nation', including Western Australia's strong connections with South Asia.[3]

Doug Plaister and Learning Not to Swim

The specific Tasmanian story, particularly Hobart, is of thousands of Tasmanians who learned 'not to swim' and to be afraid of water after 'swimming lessons' at the Education Department's cold Tepid Baths over three decades after World War II. The key person was the Department's swimming instructor Doug Plaister, who later also became Lord Mayor. His pedagogical tricks included putting his foot on your head if you were unwilling to put your head under water when standing at the end of the pool and to use the stick, intended to pull struggling swimmers to the side of the pool, to push them out instead.

When this 'learn-to swim' experience was raised on a memories/Tasmanian History Facebook page it elicited an almost volcanic eruption of thousands of horror stories, with a strong theme of the traumatic legacy which it had left. One

3 Frank Broeze: Island Nation.

comment offered a summary: "a generation of Hobart's schoolchildren have bad memories and still do not swim". Other responses included: "I remember getting thrown in and told swim or drown"; "horrible experience", "at 73 I cannot swim as I am absolutely terrified because I was pushed in the pool"; "he held my head under water and I still have a fear of water, never forgot"; "Big Bully and if still alive would be facing court"; "the prick"; "the boat hook the f@#ker"; "petrified of water on my face"; "I used to dread learn to swim"; "he nearly drowned my brother who to this day still cannot swim"; "I have a phobia of being under water"; "I don't even have baths now".[4]

While a minority who had already learned to swim elsewhere were less critical, more positive towards him (as he was to them) and some went on to obtain lifesaving certificates, the predominant tale was of collective trauma, a horror story. Perhaps Doug Plaister reflected the authoritarian values which R. Freeman Butts saw as characterising 1950s Australian schools, except he maintained them for much longer.[5]

Two Contrasting Familial Interactions with Water – Alomes and Logan

Traditions vary – by state, by region, by generation and even by family tradition.

The Alomes family experience was perhaps aquaphobic. As noted above, like thousands of Tasmanians I am uncomfortable in water, after the scary and bullying experience of Doug Plaister teaching us fear. While I did struggle, successfully, gaining my '25 yards certificate' in the even colder waters of the Derwent River at Taroona High, I enjoyed jumping on and off rocks more. The rocks and tree which I painted in oils on hessian as a high school student.

I was always more relaxed in calm water and became more comfortable when I developed backstroke … lying back and enjoying it. Not that I ever came to like the chlorinated tension of swimming pools and their anonymous change rooms with metallic lockers, keys attached to bathers, and grotty showers full of foot infections as well.

A more specific family experience may have fuelled water angst. Was I somehow influenced by a boating accident when a flat-bottomed dinghy overturned, and my grandfather assisted two cousins and their friend but then had a heart attack and died? I was only seven at the time but perhaps there was family water angst. Even surf could be dangerous. Later, in the mild surf at Park Beach, my sister was pulled out by a rip, and brought in by Jimmy, a contemporary of mine.

Water was generally to be looked at walking or running on sand or later a promenade rather than immersed in (except for a warm bath with a rubber ducky and an Airfix aircraft carrier, when young), although I did enjoy some moments of catching a wave in small surf with those polystyrene small boards held in two hands.

4 Tasmanian History (Facebook page).
5 Robert Freeman Butts: Assumptions Underlying Australian Education, pp. 59 f.

Our Taroona High blazer pockets had a stylised image of a yacht (an early school logo rather than a crest) and the school magazine was called 'Windward', although I think that just loosely suggested forward movement rather than having a nautical meaning. Our sporting world was primarily a plethora of team ball sports along with one day athletics and swimming carnivals.

Although growing up about three kilometres from the Derwent, my first time on a yacht was not until the 1990s in Vanuatu, and then, finally, in the 2000s on the Derwent. That second time was with a friend who had grown up with boats, including wooden dinghies which his father built. In Vanuatu, on one occasion I struggled to swim back to the vessel, more due to anxiety than poor technique. In Hobart, the water meant a day trip on the wooden steamship 'Cartela', on a return trip to South Arm, where my family predecessors had lived for over a century. It was either a family picnic day or a uni booze cruise, or both. I had, however, in the 1970s, been briefly in a kayak out from the beach at Ulverstone – I say briefly as the small waves and my skill deficit tipped me out quickly.

Differently, regarding my partner, Kate Jones, in warmer Sydney, her Jones and wider Logan family loved the water. It was their natural element. Kate's mother Madge had grown up for part of her childhood at Randwick, close to the charms of Coogee. Kate had always been a water baby and the modern Olympic pool was nearby on Victoria Rd. However, even for a Westie, as Gladesville girls then were, it was the surf that mattered most, although middle harbour beaches were at least salt water. Her uncle, Ross, loved swimming and fishing. Kate swam at a Bruny Island beach in Tasmania when we went there. She went in although everyone else found it too cold or they were simply urban, dry and boring … like me. One day we had an adventurous drive to Kuringai National Park, where I saw a goanna, much bigger than the blue tongue lizards of my childhood. We visited ritzy but natural Palm Beach, (celebrated in an iconic Bryan Brown/Sam Neill film) and then, further south, at Whale Beach, where I was astonished. As soon as we had parked the car, her uncle Ross, in his eighties, was heading for the surf, followed by Kate. I was more interested in watching the bride and groom and the unusual beach staging of a wedding ceremony.

I did paddle, however. I do enjoy salty wet feet, and running on firm, wet sand. Beach cricket's good too. Kate and I shared a distaste for sunburn, for sandflies and for our feet bringing sand into the car, however.

Kate preferred surf beaches – in a rare, perhaps unique, moment of Sydney snobbery she looked down on Melbourne's bay beaches. While she preferred salty waters, everyday necessity took her to the local pool and one of her greatest delights became the Prime Movers' aquarobics group of older women.

We had urban reservations about beaches, especially on 38-degree days. With our orange 120Y Datsun, the hail-damaged car from Kate's ANU friend from Narrabri (later stolen from outside our house and never seen again), journeys to Williamstown beach lacked appeal, even as I enjoyed its shallow and calm waters. Simply, it was too hot going both ways in the non-aircon car! The ledger was in the red, hot suburban roads, heated bitumen and air temperatures trumping the

cooling blue of salty water. In similar terms my poem 'All Quiet on the Summer Front' concluded with a preference for cooler times.[6]

I rest my personal dry-land-preferred case.

Frontier versus Water – The Big Picture

Other myths have proven more important in Australian memory and consciousness, despite the Island Continent's 34 000 kilometres of coastline and despite the beach and surf themes in international tourism marketing.

Even with the celebration of the 'jewel-sea' the land is dominant in Dorothea McKellar's iconic poem, 'My Country':

> I love a sunburnt country,
> A land of sweeping plains,
> Of ragged mountain ranges,
> Of droughts and flooding rains.
> I love her far horizons,
> I love her jewel-sea,
> Her beauty and her terror –
> The wide brown land for me![7]

Australia has one of the most urbanised populations in the world (around 70% living in the eight capital cities). However, Australian popular myth has focused more on the Bush, in American terms the 'Frontier', rather than the explorers and travellers by sea, or on the real centrepiece of Australian life since Federation – urban and suburban life.

The Bush Myth is bigger than the beach myth or even the recent fascination with the far Outback. It has taken many forms from the egalitarian and Left 'Australian Legend' to the celebration of the pioneers, the small farmers.[8] Its phases have included the convict era, colonial explorers, the gold diggers, small selectors running mixed farms. In culture, it includes the bush ballads and stories of Lawson and Paterson, idealisation by the Heidelberg painters, who travelled by the new trains to the Bush on the edge of the cities, then in the 20th century outback novels, two discoveries of red ochres, by Nolan and other modernists and later by Indigenous artists. Popular expressions included the many mythic Ned Kelly explorations in films, plays and paintings, and inland images through 1930s colour printing in 'Walkabout' magazine, and 1930s Jindyworobak poets romanticising the land and Indigenous themes.[9] School textbooks took up the theme 'Australia rides on the sheep's back', especially in the 1950s and early 1960s. During the 1950s hydro-powered industrialisation in the then 'Apple Isle', Tasmania, several physiocratic sceptics believed that, unlike agrarian cultivation, manufacturing was not real industry.[10]

6 Stephen Alomes: Selective Ironies, p. 44.
7 Dorothea Mackellar: 'My Country' in id.: The Closed Door and Other Verses, p. 9 ff..
8 Russel Ward: The Australian Legend; John Carroll: Intruders in the Bush.
9 Geoffrey Serle: From Deserts the Prophets Come.
10 Stephen Alomes: Lands of Ideas.

In many countries, with cities growing as ports or through their location as settlements around rivers, the ship theme is not uncommon, as in the ship in the Paris and Melbourne city crests, the latter also including a whaling image, significant in the early colonial period. In Australia, the crests of states and cities often had a mix – a significant sailing ship, a cow or sheep, and, after the 1850s, gold rushes in a diggers image. Sometimes they added something INDIGENOUS Australian, as in the kangaroo and the emu as 'supporters', and imperial to chivalric images, such as a British lion.

In the Australian colonies after 1788, Adelaide had a 'Buffalo' replica at Glenelg, remembering the 1836 settlers' ship, and in NSW Anniversary Day referred to January 1788 (before its several national political distortions as Australia Day). Tasmania took the sea more seriously – after all it was named after its European 'discoverer', Abel Janszoon Tasman, and its inland exploration story was smaller and complicated – especially the 'often forgotten invaders' wars against the Indigenous people. In other states local land explorers provided the great man in history model, although often few examples from other 'colonies' – Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson finally crossing the Blue Mountains and 'opening up' the interior, in South Australia John McDouall Stuart, in Queensland Leichhardt, in WA Forrest, and first in Victoria both the original Vandemonian boat people, Thomas Henty at Portland and John Batman around Melbourne, and the overland explorer who opened up these southern lands of 'Australia Felix', Thomas Mitchell. Matthew Flinders was the one great coastal explorer with a high profile.

Before Australian schooling forgot generations of settlement and before it discovered Indigenous history, it has had nearly a century of the crazy national obsession – war. War itself has had its associations with the seas, the 'Returned' Services League (RSL) initially unwilling to recognise the home front defenders of Darwin in World War II, then the indigenous wars after the invasion of 1788.

In my historical analysis of the eight generations of settler-invaders, their world is predominantly between the coast and the mountains. Even in the sprawling suburban cities, the water can be a long way away, and many, including me, feel uncomfortable in water, due to bullying swimming teachers, and cold water. Our dreaming was shaped by the cultivated grass of urban footy ovals or suburban gardens, indigenous and exotic, the suburban family car, and by the picture theatre, now complemented by many other screens.

Hands Across the Sea – Friends and Enemies

In a country shaped by Isolated Country Syndrome (ICS, as well as Small Country Syndrome, although only small in population), the other watery aspect involves two seemingly contradictory themes which look across the seas.

One is the worldly awareness engendered by port cities, by trade and immigration in a great trading and immigrant nation, linked even demographically by sea, by sail and then steam, until the global aviation era from the 1970s. The different phases included convicts and masters, immigrants, returning soldiers, young travellers on the 'Big Trip', which Kiwis call 'OE' or Overseas Experience,

rather near to a Bildungsroman tale, and now tourists. Interestingly, led by 'grey nomads', campervan journeys around Australia offer another journeying alternative, especially given the global pandemic.

Parochial ignorance and fear, including fear of other peoples and fear of invasion from the near north continued. The fear of the 'Yellow Peril' was overlaid by angsts about the 'Red Peril', even before the Cold Wars; now, a vague fear persists.

The cultural result is another sea theme, the odyssey, the journey, the 'Big Trip', once to London and Europe, then Asia and now New York, which I addressed in the poem 'Innocents Abroad', about my Wanderjahre – "We came by boat | Last of a generation".[11] Following that journey, I wrote 'When London Calls. The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain',[12] studying the great post-war waves, including the Sixties plus Baby Boomer exodus of which I and my sister were a part. Appropriately, the cover image of this Cambridge University Press book shows the ties which bind but are also broken; metaphorically the streamers are 'umbilical' cords, soon cut, between the passengers on a great ocean liner and those farewelling friends and family members on the dock below.

Australians are separated from and connected to the wider world by water, as in the national anthem's most vestigial Victorian poetic line, 'girt by sea', even as it is accurate. Even the eight generations of settlers on the land – for we are today never just 'multicultural immigrants' or transplanted Poms – saw some of their produce shipped to the UK and Europe, as suggested by the apple trucks heading for Hobart's wharves which I saw coming from the Huon Rd every autumn in the 1960s.

The settler-colonial (and settler-invader) experiences had many ramifications. Others will remark on the implications for attitudes to primary Indigenous Australians. Tasmanian invader-settlers shared the European "Lords of Human Kind" (in the historian V.G. Kiernan's phrase)[13] assumptions of the century of European imperialism. Continuing Western and Christian ideas of racial and cultural superiority intensified later in the century, through Spencerian-Darwinian racial ideology (1870s-1940s and beyond), which infected the West, and had its Asian mirrors, which continue today.

Even as they discover their own land and their roots, the sea provides Australians with their most recurrent actual and mythic journey to what have been seen as the 'source countries' of Western culture, from the classical Mediterranean to Western Europe and Britain. Just like the builders of grand buildings on the Parthenon model, in Europe and Australia, we will forget to mention slavery in Greece and Rome.

The sea is central for post-1788 Australian voyagers, the settler-invaders. The sea and Britain are where imported imperial culture came from, as well as capital and labour. In Australian imaginative fantasies, the land is not just girt by sea. The oceans were also where the potential 'enemy' came from, even though Australia is almost impossible to invade – the only ever invaders arrived in 1788 and after. Today, somehow by osmosis, such angsts inform illogical fears of 'boat

11 Stephen Alomes: Selective Ironies, p. 14.
12 Stephen Alomes: When London Calls.
13 Victor G. Kiernan: The Lords of Human Kind.

people', even though most visa-breachers come by plane. Most recently, a desire to obtain a few nuclear submarines to integrate with the American forces in the South China Sea has added a different dimension.

Significantly, it was difficult over the past three centuries for invaders' large military forces to cross the 30 kilometres of La Manche, aka the English Channel. Arguably, Australia, with its southern cities over 5000 kilometres from Jakarta and Singapore, has always been difficult to invade, and almost impossible to occupy. Australia could be blockaded which is why – to return to submarine debates – it actually needs conventional submarines to protect its trade routes instead. Australia's protection by distance, an unrecognised fact, has not stemmed invasion fear, nor its corollary, a related subservience in imperial powers' frontier wars around the globe.

Given our island, colonial and small country syndromes, Australian troops crossed the seas to fight on foreign shores, as they saluted the great imperial power, in eight frontier wars from 1880 to 2021, in addition to the two world wars. Most strangely, but perhaps in a country never again invaded, except by the original invaders from 1788, the resultant Returned Services League's (RSL) definition of military service remained socially and culturally conceived of as going overseas.

Enduring resistance to a recognition of the settler/invader – Indigenous wars by the Australian War Memorial was justified on two grounds: that such conflict was more skirmishes than war; and that it fell outside the official definition of the obligations of the Memorial. Fortunately, with a new Labor government in May 2022, those positions are now being revised.

A personal and family fusion brings together war tales and the colonial odyssey to the world, particularly the UK and Europe. They came together, with modifications, on one of the last travelling, rather than cruising, ocean liners, almost precisely three decades apart. In February 1942 the ocean liner, then named the 'SS West Point', brought Australian troops back from the Middle East to fight the Pacific war as Australia faced a possible direct threat to the continent from Japan, including my father, who served in the army from 1939 to 1945. In January 1972, I crossed the 'sea wall' (in novelist Christopher Koch's term)[14] to the 'mainland', to Melbourne, where I boarded the 'Australis', the large Chandris liner, the same ship, to travel to the UK via a long stopover in the US. A year later I would return initially by plane, via Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, catching one of the last of the travellers' ocean liners to Perth, then hitchhiking overland back home.

While I am not afflicted by seasickness, for most Australians the sea was a means not an end, even as ocean travel became safer. Now in what was, before Covid-19 and climate change, an era of air travel Australians look down on the sea from over 30 000 feet as they similarly look down upon the interior in the many hours it takes to travel from the southeastern cities to depart the northwestern coasts of the island continent.

Australia's east coast is a land of the grey-greens and the blue hills east and south of the great divide where the majority of the Australian population live.

14 Christopher Koch: Across the Sea Wall.

In recent years, as a Tasmanian expat in Melbourne, I have been imaginatively turned on by the beautiful valley and hills shots, and the gentle rivers of southern Tasmania, perhaps the Huon Valley, in the charmingly ironic comedy television show, 'Rosehaven'. Even more interesting than the personal charms of the female star … and the genial oddities of the male star … who grew up north of the 'Flannelette Curtain', that is in Hobart's working-class suburbs.

The Sydney-based and oriented Australian Tourism Commission markets Australia through Sydney Harbour, the bridge and the opera house, along with the Reef and the Rock, the Red Heart visually apotheosised through Uluru/Ayers Rock. Brand Sydney presents itself as Brand Oz. That image is reinforced by the foreign correspondents who are nearly all based in Sydney. However, most of the 4.9 million people of Australia's second biggest city (Melbourne, for good and bad, is actually bigger) will see the harbour as often as they see Uluru, rarely or almost never. A majority of them rarely see the beaches of the eastern or northern suburbs. Considering Australia's three great sailing capitals, Sydney, Hobart and Perth, again most of the population will never have been out on a yacht or even a motorboat or fishing dinghy, even if a bigger percentage of the population in Hobart will enjoy 'river glimpses'.

In developing a littoralist argument which focuses on the shore rather than the sea and on the voyage or journey connecting a settler-colonial transplant (and, without choice, an Indigenous population) to wider worlds, I don't deny the fundamental relationship with the land.

Lacking the natural wealth across wide areas of the USA, and its ideological energies and imperatives, the settler-colonial and settler-invader population of Australia has sought to sink roots in the thinner soil of the continent. Americans have big ideological dreams rooted in the Puritan legacy and the experience of empire or are focused on achievements measured in dollars. Australians, given their less than ideal convict beginnings, their thinner soil and smaller scale on the world stage, have been more likely to define their belonging and themselves through simple settlement, sinking practical roots, once rural and now for over a century urban.

Australians have long defined themselves above all through owning their own home, a foreign concept in much of Europe and North East Asia, and perhaps soon foreign in 21st century Australia. The quarter acre block which became the space for the domestic suburban temple in the post-war boom years had its origins with Governor Philip who designated that ideal space for planned habitation.

The great PC folly of our times is one which accompanies an otherwise desirable phenomenon, a generally working multiculturalism. It is the chant-like observation with reference to the journey over the sea and now the air: "We are all immigrants". While Australia is an historically immigrant nation after the 1788 invasion, and with very high percentages today, it is absurd to overuse the immigrant moniker to refer to a country after over seven generations of settlement. We might ask, in related terms, when did a Viking become a Norman, when did a Norman invader become English. In Australia the false multicultural theme denies legitimacy to earlier generations of settlers and fertilises milder versions

of populism, as unlikely everyday people, erroneously as well, assume that Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party speak for them.

A related intellectual PC folly parallels the false idea of Australia defined only as an immigrant society. Drawing cues from Left-liberal radical internationalism, the folly treats all nationalism as racist chauvinism, rather than allowing a place for legitimate concern for your own society. That encourages a reaction, engendering populist prejudices, another story.

A Twenty First Century Variation: Demographic, Regional and Cultural Patterns and Water

Relationships with water are influenced by geography, demography, age, gender and culture, as well as region and family. This diversity begins with a greater beach orientation in states with warmer summers and warmer water temperatures, which also produce more competitive swimmers and surfers.

Now that Australia has a massive overseas born population and large numbers of international students, patterns in drowning also reflect the current demography. Overseas born adults and international students, many of whom have limited swimming ability and lack cultural understanding ('Swim between the Flags', especially at surf beaches), are a significant proportion of drowning victims. In the sprawling suburbias of Australia working class migrants are increasingly concentrated in outer suburbs up to, or more than, 50 kilometres from the waterline of the coast.

A 2022 Royal Life Saving Society study reported a rising death toll.[15] Other factors contribute, including correlations with alcohol, a greater proportion of young males, and the deaths of older swimmers and of infants in home swimming pools. A decline in compulsory school swimming lessons in the overcrowded school curriculums, except in Tasmania, despite the Tepid Baths history, may also have a causal role.[16]

A Shoreline View of the World

My discussion has not addressed several themes: the diverse Indigenous experiences of coastal life, the economics associated with the sea, and tourism, water sports (although we might note that Australia wins most of its Olympic gold in or on the water), water species and global warming.

At the same time island stories marked significant moments in my research journey. In nomenclature and conceptual analysis my research has addressed Australia's diverse island, colonial and national experiences. That began with my first academic article on Tasmanian identifications with 'Island, Nation and Empire' during the Boer War of 1899-1902. Other work explored relationships

15 Julie Power: Australia Records its Worst Year of Deaths by Drowning Since 1996.
16 3AW Melbourne: The Staggering Number of Australian Adults Who Can't Swim.

and questions of dependence and independence – 'The Satellite Society' in 1981 and the changing and contradictory forms of Australian nationalism in 'A Nation at Last?' in 1988.[17]

The prose poem which anticipated this analysis returns to my two themes, particularly the shore dwellers, the denizens of our port city capitals and their sense of water, and less, the second part of the story, the journey, the voyage, the odyssey of a planted but also transplanted people, which I had explored in 'Innocents Abroad'.[18]

Confessions of a Littoralist

We are a littoral people
entranced by rainbows, by light on water
by waves and sand, despite the flies.
The coast, not the bush, calls me
despite the smell of gums and the yellow of winter wattle.
I leave the literalism to the bush dwellers
who know that life is nasty, brutish and short,
with fire and flood, drought and unbearable heat.
We Australians are littoralists,
people of the coast, the shoreline,
the space between hills and water.
Hills, not mountains, please note.
And those wild soldiers, brave or foolhardy,
are not mountain men but just wild colonial boys.
Not that all littoralists are in harmony
A big divide exists – between the majority, people like me,
and the minority.
We drive to the esplanade, walk along the beach and rocks,
in summer our feet briefly touch the froth
as the surf becomes at the beach.
But this swimming, surfing and sailing stuff does not appeal.
A few charge in, embracing the waves,
immersing themselves in nature's elements.
Others, more philosophically bent,
look to Jung or feminist environmentalism,
Is their sea part of a collective unconscious?
I glimpse the waves through a car window
while enjoying an ice cream.
More radically, the water is touched lightly,
by slightly sandy, accidentally salty, feet
We need the shores of our dreaming,
but dreaming does not demand diving in
Or even getting wet.[19]

This article is written from the perspective of a cultural historian. In recent years, after a 40-year gap since school, I have found a second artistic oeuvre after poetry, primarily expressionist painting of populist leaders. However, in a minor

17 Stephen Alomes: Island, Nation and Empire, pp. 9-18.; Stephen Alomes: The Satellite Society, pp. 2-20.; Stephen Alomes: A Nation at Last.
18 Stephen Alomes: Selective Ironies, p. 14.
19 Ibid., p. 15.

key I have pursued some seascapes, feeling an affinity, which allows me to paint Tasmanian shorelines, particularly Bicheno, while I have neither any interest, nor talent, for painting other landscapes, rural or urban. While my own artistic claims are real, if modest, there is an important general argument for the humanities and social sciences to recognise and appreciate artistic explorations of society and culture, and retreat from current academic fashions that is the often inappropriate formulaic scientisation of research methods and forms of presentation and their digital indices of achievement and impact.

Reflections and a Suggestion of Retraction

Leone Huntsman's 'Sand in our Souls: The Beach in Australian History', a study of Australians' imaginative relationship with the beach and its waters captures its significance. In contrast to Pearson,[20] Booth[21] and Franklin,[22] she focuses more on the idealisation than the reality: "The ways in which artists, writers, film-makers and the advertising industry have depicted the beach are examined for the light they throw on the beach's significance".[23]

Two iconic images are important, both Sydney in origin and in time near to the sesquicentenary of 1938, coming from a photographer and an artist with studios in the same building. Modernist photographer Max Dupain's 'The Sunbaker' (1937) has become one of the most important images in Australian photography. Charles Meere's painting, 'Australian Beach Pattern' (1940), has also become iconic, for example as the cover image of Robert Drewe's short story collection, 'The Bodysurfers' (1984). Meere's work had many European art influences. Significantly, as his close associate and student, Freda Robertshaw (who did her own related painting 'Australian Beach Scene', 1940), remarked, "Charles never went to the beach. We made up most of the figures, occasionally using one of Charles' employees as a model for the hands and feet but never using the complete figure".[24]

In summary, while the beach is culturally significant in Australian dreaming, that idealisation is more important than the immersion experience involving sand, salt water and surf. Like the California music of the Beach Boys, or even the instrumental 'Bombora' by the local Sixties surf rock group, the Atlantics (who took their name from a service station sign), the idea of the beach and of water mattered more than the reality.

Without retracting my argument, is it possible that the new millennium has ushered in a new relationship to water and to nature for a significant number of Australians? I grew up in the era of team ball sports played as an 'Agon' on defined mainly grass surfaces – and they remain dominant, with the Australian game, Australian Football, or AFL, the leader among the four football codes.

20 Kent Pearson: Surfing Subcultures of Australia and New Zealand.
21 Douglas Booth: Australian Beach Cultures.
22 Adrian Franklin: On Why We Dig the Beach, pp. 261-285.
23 Leone Huntsman: Sand in our Souls.
24 P. McCouat: The Origins of an Australian Art Icon.

However, we have also seen the rising popularity of 'Ilinx' or vertigo sports, involving movement, disorientation and often interaction with nature, including surfing, windsurfing, skateboarding, skiing, snowboarding, various forms of bike riding and more. Perhaps, in the sphere of sport, if not in every aspect of life and leisure, Australian interactions with water and nature may be changing.

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