

Dr Adrian Caesar, 'Dorothea Mackellar's 'Core of my heart' (My Country).

I'm very pleased to have been invited to say a few words on the occasion of the inscription of several new additions to the Australian register of UNESCO's Memory of the World project. In particular, I'm privileged to celebrate the first Australian literary manuscript to be added: the manuscript of Dorothea Mackellar's poem, 'Core of my Heart', more widely known by its later title, 'My Country'.

Before making some specific remarks about this manuscript, it's salutary, I think, to acknowledge the general importance of collecting, preserving and exhibiting documents of historical, political and cultural significance. It may seem obvious to those of us gathered here today, and seem to go without saying, but in these days of repeated budgetary attacks on our national institutions, it is more imperative than ever to stridently insist upon the lasting relevance of the documentary record. It is unfortunate, too, that the incursions of post-modern relativism by tending to suggest that all history is fiction has played into the hands of those who seek to benefit from what we have heard recently referred to as 'alternative facts'. In the increasingly Orwellian world of political doublespeak, the preservation of documents to which empirical method might be applied, and from which 'facts' may be adduced, seems more vital than ever to our ability to understand our past and chart our future.

Although there is no hard and fast necessary distinction between literary and historical manuscripts, I believe manuscripts of important literary works have their own particular value. Of course, the working drafts of a play, poem or novel can lend scholars and students insight into the creative process and the developmental stages of a work. But there is, I think, a less academic, more ineffable joy afforded by the contemplation of the original drafts or fair copies of a well-loved work. While reading a published work in print lends the story or poem a kind of impersonal authority, to view the holograph manuscript of the same work, returns us to the personality of the author; it leads us to contemplate the human agency of the work, and as it does so, helps us to wonder at and celebrate the creative mind in action. We are forcibly reminded that the artifact has an artificer and thus we are led to a renewed sense of intimacy both with the work and its creator.

So it is, I think, with this clean manuscript copy of Dorothy Mackellar's 'Core of my Heart'. It might not be too much to suggest that the lines in the second stanza of this poem are the most well-known and well-beloved in all Australian literature. The poem has been taught in schools for generations and has entered the collective word-hoard of the nation's imagination. When I came to Australia over thirty years ago, I remember these lines being quoted to me within weeks of my arrival. And, a few days before Margy Burn asked me to deliver this talk, on a road-trip between Canberra and Adelaide, half way across the Hay plain, my wife and I looked at each other and simultaneously recited, 'I love a sunburnt country,/ A land of sweeping plains'. Last night I was talking to my son-in-law about this event. He is an electrical

engineer and ex-army officer. When I mentioned the poem, he immediately recited the whole of the second stanza, word-perfect, without a pause. I'm sure many, many Australians have shared similar experiences and have a similar knowledge of these lines. Dorothea Mackellar's poem helps one to see and appreciate the Australian landscape for what it is in all its huge variety.

To encounter the manuscript of the poem is to be immediately reminded of its origins. We are taken back to the young woman sitting patiently handwriting a fair copy of the poem that we now know she laboured to compose over several years. We are encouraged to research the origins of the poem in Dorothea Mackellar's sojourn in England in the first decade of the 20th Century, and the way in which her encounters with the English landscape and cultural landscape led her to this celebration of Australia's 'wide brown land'. There was in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century a taste in England for patriotic verse and verse which celebrated in a sentimental and sub-Wordsworthian way the English countryside. Mackellar's endeavour in 'Core of my Heart' is to distinguish herself and her country of origin from this cultural model. It is on record that she felt Australia wasn't understood in England, and she sets out to put this right. She also, in the spirit encouraged by Federation, makes clear her allegiance to a specifically Australian cultural ethos, which is distinct from England.

Hence the poem moves from a deliberate evocation of the English landscape and those who love it to the grandeur of the Australian horizon. The poem is addressed to the English who are said to rejoice in a small-scale landscape of 'field and coppice', 'green and shaded lanes', 'ordered woods and gardens'. This provides the basis for Mackellar's contrasting evocation of her home in Australia: 'I love a sunburnt country, / a land of sweeping plains /of ragged mountain-ranges/ of droughts and flooding rains.'¹ The harshness of the Australian land and climate are included in Mackellar's panegyric: the rigours of drought, fire and flood are alluded to. And if Mackellar finds something of the romantic sublime in this harshness, its beauty and its terror are encapsulated, she also comes down to earth when she speaks of the heartbreak of witnessing cattle dying in the midst of a drought. But, she avers, for all its difficulties, the land ultimately gives back threefold to those who live within it and love it. Mackellar lays claim to the idea that her relationship to the land forms the 'core' of her heart.

As we all know too well, patriotism and nationalism can be dangerous emotions. So-called 'love of country' can too easily warp into a sense of superiority, xenophobia and a desire to wield power over others. It behoves us, then, to consider carefully the place of a poem like Mackellar's in our collective cultural imagination, and to suggest that a fruitful distinction might be made between a love of place for its own sake, and

¹ I have followed the punctuation on the ms. here, which differs considerably from the punctuation of the published version.

love of place as the basis for an assertion of assumed superiority and privileged difference. It is for this reason that I prefer the original title of Mackellar's poem. 'Core of my heart' suggests the personal and emotional ties between the writer and the landscape she celebrates. 'My country' on the other hand, however inadvertently, tends to enact a linguistic appropriation. We move from an idea of the landscape possessing the writer to an idea of the writer possessing the land.

The manuscript of Dorothea Mackellar's poem, then, leads us both to a contemplation of the circumstances of its composition and to the power of its potential ongoing contribution. For surely in this its first completed form, it might lead us and students of the future to think about our relationship to land and landscape, and not only to use that to assert our independence from England, but also to seek an empathetic understanding of Aboriginal notions of country. Instead of 'us' and 'them', it seems to me that love of landscape, love of country as it is articulated in Mackellar's poem might provide a bridge towards healing rather than a chasm between colonisers and colonised.

It will be evident from these remarks, that I think Dorothea Mackellar's poem is not only the purveyor of literary values; it is a document of huge cultural and historical significance, well beloved by many thousands of Australians. It is to be hoped that its inscription as part of this international project will bring the poem to the attention of a wider international audience, as well as cementing its place in the Australian canon. The State Library of NSW and everyone involved in the project are to be congratulated for nominating this manuscript for the Memory of the World project.