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Uluru: A Rock That Plagues Australia's Conscience

By Paul Daley
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Occasionally a piece of writing will capture us and turn our thoughts inwards on to how we connect to the geographic, spiritual and emotional places where we live.

It will spin our minds around and force us to confront existential questions about belonging to a continent of many nations.

You may think you know your homeland. But confronted with its vastness and apparent emptiness, you may also shudder with a realisation that you are alien in most of it and can, perhaps, never truly hope to know or understand it.

Mark McKenna impels us to this place, geographically and as a state of contemplation, in Return To Uluru, a book whose subtitle promises a killing, a hidden history and "a story that goes to the heart of the nation". It is all of this. Yet it also elegantly transcends all this by coaxing non-Indigenous Australians to a discomfiting, dawning realisation that perhaps they barely know or understand the essence of their country at all.

McKenna, like most Australians, lives on the coastal plains. The "edge", he calls it. But as he turns his gaze inwards on the continental interior – to the tourist mecca that became "Ayer's Rock", to the violent frontier cop Bill McKinnon and his victim Yokununna, to the clash between tribal and whitefella law, to the dispossession and rightful return to Uluru of the traditional owners, the Anangu – the middle becomes the true edge.

The interior, the white explorer's and frontierman's seduction by it, his impulse – and failure – to conquer it, is a central part of non-Indigenous history, national myth-making and definition. But the interior also serves as metaphor for existential yearning, conscience and the great mystery (for most) of what 60,000-plus years of continental Indigenous occupation, belief and experience has layered upon this land.

Other great writers have grappled with it before – this interior as actual place and emotional/spiritual space. Patrick White's Johann Ulrich Voss – like Ludwig Leichardt and other real-life explorers – was vaingloriously driven there by a conqueror's impulse to dance with fatality.

That White imagined this continental interior from his own edge in Sydney is testimony to his powers of literary evocation.

"White had never ventured into the hinterland which his book [Voss] brings into blazing dimensions, and would never do so," wrote Nicholas Shakespeare, although White was influenced by much else including Sidney Nolan's paintings about the calamitous Burke and Wills expedition.

As the Christ-like Voss doubted the spiritual self-awareness of his expedition fellows and "entered in advance that vast, expectant country, whether of stone deserts, veiled mountains or voluptuous, fleshy forests", he knew his "soul must experience first ... the excruciating passage into its interior".

Having turned his back on Australia after the second world war, George Johnston in My Brother Jack contemplated the mythic power over men of that same interior, writing, "The continent is cruel and pitiless, four-fifths of it uninhabitable. The vast dry heart of the land is dead, and it is on this intractable central grimness that the teeth of adventure have long since been blunted. Here journeys have ended, the pioneering flame has guttered and failed, hopes and ambitions lie buried beneath blowing sand. It is the one challenge from which the adventurous Australian has had to retreat, back to the narrow safer skin of his coastal holdings, and he has been forced to turn his back, because he must, on the invincible wilderness that lies behind him."

Johnston was right about much but wrong about the interior being "dead". It has the deepest earthly link to human life. And the means to survival. That is, of course, for those with the knowledge.

McKenna – with a powerful force of Indigenous Australian antiquity impelling so much of his celebrated writing about national identity, the future and the past – drives himself towards the centre.

"Today, driving the trail of the white man's tears in the centre, it seems that the country has dismissed every attempt to conquer it," he writes, those evocative white man's tears having evaporated as they dripped on the timeless Indigenous dreaming tracks (the "songlines" for which Englishman Bruce Chatwin had to endure the "horror" of Alice Springs to even begin to understand) that criss-cross the interior.

"The country defied all attempts to describe it. It seemed impossible to come here and not be confronted by the ultimate questions of human existence. The centre was not a place so much as a presence – one that reminds us that we are not at the centre of things. A centre that exposes our hubris and places our existence against a vast backdrop of geological time. No Acropolis or Doge's palace could ever stand here. The land itself is the teacher", McKenna writes.

There was some indefinable sense of that learnedness among the first Europeans when they first saw Uluru, at once existentially belittling and a grand wonder of the world – a natural cathedral of the spirit, cosmology, geology and ancient humanity.

"When Europeans first came upon Uluru, they often searched in vain for the language to describe a place they found incomprehensible. Neither words nor images seemed to do it justice. Merely to set eyes on the rock was to be induced to silence. Convinced from the first moment that Uluru was among 'the most majestic wonders of the natural world', yet lacking the intimate knowledge of its Indigenous custodians, the Anangu, the visitors struggled to convey the deeper emotions they felt in the rock's presence."

Little has changed among the pilgrims who flock there to "feel" something – meaning? – and to find themselves.

Even the most heretical towards Indigenous sentiment seem to have understood that much about Uluru. It is why they vowed to keep clambering all over it until they were forbidden from doing so in 2019.

Bad cop McKinnon understood enough. But he defiled the place in the worst way – with a murder that helped drive the Anangu away. By murdering Yokununna in one of its caves and secreting the truth from official record.

The rock plagued McKinnon's conscience. He could not, despite the lies he told himself, an official inquiry and family, ultimately run from the truth of his actions. His personal archive, secreted in a Brisbane garage, doesn't lie. Historian McKenna unearthed it. Just as he found the skull of Yokununna in a room dedicated to holding remains of thousands of Indigenous people at the South Australian Museum – testimony to countless other crime scenes.

Uluru now stands as the foremost site of national conscience, the place from which emerged in 2017 the Uluru Statement from the Heart calling for a voice to parliament, treaty and truth.

The rejection of this call from Uluru by the big whitefella government reverberates metaphorically as the nation's unsettled interior, meanwhile. Its troubled conscience if you like.

McKenna's short, elegant book guides us on that challenging internal journey to confront this.