

# INHERITING STONES

by *Christine Hansen*

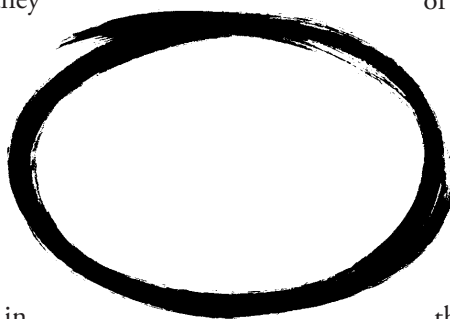
My great aunt watched as I lifted the stone from the ash-tray. It was a perfectly symmetrical egg shape, slightly larger than my hand, with the narrow tip sheered off to form a flat edge. It had been rubbed with red ochre so that the once porous surface was now smoothed to a fiery sheen. 'You won't be getting that' she spat. 'I've left it to Len'. Clearly it was a treasure, one of the few objects that had migrated from her former life into the nursing home. And clearly she thought I was fortune hunting, the true motive behind my questions about family history. She needn't have worried. I was after stories, not fortune. Anyway, there was no fortune. But she was right to be suspicious. It was the only object of my great grandfather's to have survived, an artifact that carried our origin story from memory into matter. 'What is it?' I asked disingenuously, knowing full well what it was. 'It's the stone of a lubra, for grinding seed' she replied, using the archaic nomenclature for an Aboriginal woman. 'Your great grandfather dug it up when he was out fencing with the boys, back when they were taking up the farm. He was digging a posthole and accidentally hit on a skeleton, so he opened up the grave to have a look and found that. He buried the skeleton again, but kept the stone. Nice isn't it?' 'Nice' didn't even come close. As I held this most intimate of objects in my hand I felt the fault line of the past fold in and around it, a cascade of meanings dissolving and reforming as the full context of the story fell into view.

The great grandfather she was referring to was Christian Hansen, my illegal immigrant forbear, who arrived in Australia from Copenhagen in 1864. A young pastry chef in the merchant navy, he jumped ship to seek his fortune in

the goldfields of the new world (fortune hunting, it seems, is a family theme). Danish pastry, nineteenth century Copenhagen, imagined treasure, police evasion, – there was much to like in this origin story and once I would have enjoyed an afternoon of tea and a retelling of the famous tale. Today, however, I snagged on my great Aunt's language. 'Taking up the farm,' she'd said. It was a commonly used term in Australia, a phrase carefully calibrated to smooth over historic bumps, a clever sleight of tongue that evoked the back breaking work of pastoral pioneers while side stepping the nasty business of remembering those who were displaced (often murdered) in the process. I dropped the stone back into its Australia-shaped holder quick smart. No matter that the reputation of my forebear was as a kind, helpful, light-hearted man with an impenetrable Danish accent and a pocket full of boiled sweets, he had tensioned the wire which bound the land to private treaty, destroying the cohesive geography enjoyed by the ancestors of the woman whose grave he had robbed. Fenced out, fenced in, cut off, taken up; the language of remembering and forgetting.

It is not surprising that stone tools and farmers are often in the same story. Out all day in the open fields, they are attuned to their surroundings and worked stone transmits its human history with surprising directness. A smoothed surface, a sharpened edge, a knapped tip; the marks of the maker speak clearly of intention. It was also a farmer who had found the next grindstone I held. He must have come across it in a field, churned up by cattle or a plough or the weather. This stone was also perfectly rounded with a sheered-off end, but it didn't transmit its human history with quite the same vibrancy as my Aunt's, perhaps because I had selected it from the plastic box it shared with eighty or ninety almost identical others. It might equally have been the catalogue number inscribed on its surface, transforming it into a flavourless artifact of science, sapped of domestic zest. It was housed in a cupboard full of plastic boxes, each labeled according to stone type – quartz, silcrete, chert, miscellaneous. Sorted and packed, its future as a dusty remnant of a once vibrant culture was secured.

The keepers of these 'treasures' are often as unsure about what to do with them as the people who find them. Museums have entire buildings full of them. Local councils send them to historical societies. National parks, apparently, store them in basement cupboards, like the one I was standing in front of. What else are they to do? And their collections keep growing. You'd think that all the stones would have been found after two centuries, but each year several more are added to the boxes. I can imagine the scene: the farmer walks to



the back of his tractor to unhitch the slasher/plough/hay baler and scuffs a rock with his boot. As it rolls off his foot he notices its perfect symmetry. His hand recognizes its use before he thinks the word 'tool'. And before he has considered why, its weight sits satisfyingly in his palm. Once in his grasp, the distance between the fleshy warmth of himself and the stone's previous owner collapses; he feels its history of harvesting and carrying, of winnowing and grinding, of chatter and gossip, of shared food and family squabbles, the rhythm and song of daily life. If he imagines too far, the collapse reverberates through his body, his feet, into the soil he has just ploughed. The land talks back, dirty talk about roots, about belonging. He can't throw the stone away; it is too full of...what? Vitality? So he catalogues it as 'interesting', as 'historic', and offers it to the nearest authority as a 'donation'. And there they all are, boxes and boxes of them, labeled and sorted in perpetuity, the 'heritage' of the Australian Alps National Park.

I say Australian Alps National Park because that is where I was standing at the time, but the name is a bit misleading. Compared to the European Alps, this range would barely rate as foothills. In their defense though, mountains here are measured not by height but by time. The high snowy plateaus that formed as the continent split from Gondwanaland have been raised and smoothed over 350 million years. The highest of the peaks (and the highest point in Australia) is known as Mount Kosciuszko, named by the adventurer Paul Strzelicki in 1840 in honour of his Polish compatriot and hero of the American Revolution, General Tadeusz Kościuszko, who not surprisingly never made it to Australia. For the twenty-one thousand years before Strzelicki arrived the local Ngarigo people knew the mountain as *Targangal*. But in the 1800s, new maps overwrote the old words, replacing the deep past with a future anchored somewhere else. The Australian landscape is littered with weird linguistic detritus like this.

I came to thinking about the Ngarigo, their stone tools and their long history in the mountains, as I stood in the national park education centre basement, primarily because about ten of them were standing next to me. We were in the park to attend the annual joint meeting of administrators and Ngarigo elders, the collaborative group which makes decisions about the long-term care of the wilderness area.

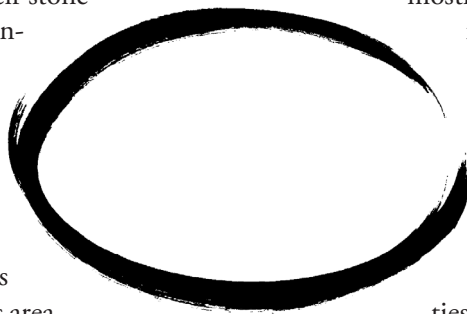
These gatherings are an occasion for the Ngarigo community to meet and socialize with each other – for some it is the only occasion of the year in which to see relatives. There's a lot to catch up on and exchanging family news is high priority. So if the tour of the basement stone collections that kicked off the weekend seemed a little, well, irrelevant, it wasn't because of the expert commen-

tary being offered. And it wasn't that the stones weren't interesting either. But stones are stones and they can't compete with news of births, deaths and marriages, let alone gossip about divorces, money and political skulduggery. The volume of talk from the back of the room indicated the level of attention being paid to the excel spreadsheets detailing typology/location/provenance brandished by the park ranger. I dropped my stone back into the box as they were hastily packed into their cupboard. Time to move on.

As part of its remit, the park offers classes to school groups on the natural and human history of the ranges, and to help them illustrate their story, the entrance of the education centre is furnished with large panels depicting the astounding flora and fauna of the alpine region. Among the display is a glass case that holds examples of local Aboriginal tools: boomerangs, digging sticks, spear tips, axes and grinding stones. It is a weird little cabinet, designed I assume to connect park visitors to the pre-colonial world, as well as a place to publicly display some of their basement collection. But the objects behind the glass don't tell a particularly complex story; rather, they hover in some kind of pure permanent past, which is mysteriously disappeared yet somehow always present. In reality, the silent historical trail, for those who want to follow it, leads from the cabinet out into the surrounding countryside and all the way back to the 1820s when the first immigrants arrived to 'take up' farms. Instantly the new arrivals introduced massive herds of cattle and sheep into the mountain grasslands. These heavy, hard-hoofed animals, so different from the soft padded marsupials native to the region, fouled the waterways and ate the vegetation back to bare soil. Almost immediately the Ngarigo were estranged from the broad inter-connected landscape that they occupied in seasonal rotation. Ducks, fish, possums, wallabies, kangaroos, grasses, seeds, nuts, tubers – their daily foods for millennia – were fenced in, fenced out, rounded up, mown down. The people were forced onto missions (in this region

mostly Moravian) and gradually, family by family, were removed from the mountains and relocated to the coast. It is now more than ninety years since any of the Ngarigo have lived on their own country, and that might be the end of the story – except that, against the odds and in contradiction of the authorities' expectations, the Ngarigo didn't disappear. They made new homes, kept their families in tact as much as the state would allow, and never stopped loving their homeland. Today, almost all of the elders attending the national park meeting live within a two or three hour drive of Kosciuszko, their beloved *Targangal*.

Through the entrance hall and past the illustrated panels,



more exciting developments were taking shape; morning tea and cakes were being set out on the tables in the staff room. But before we could fall on the cream-jam sponge, an 'event' had been arranged. An esteemed guest, one of Australia's most famous archeologists and the foremost authority on the deep past of the region, had been invited to give a presentation. His book, the definitive work on Australian archeology, had just been republished in a new edition and the chapter on the mountains had been updated with the results of his latest research. There was a power point presentation and an interesting talk about stone tools, with details on quarries and quartz and cores.

I was sitting in the audience with my Ngarigo friend and research collaborator Aunty D., at whose invitation I was attending the meeting (in Aboriginal communities the titles *aunty* and *uncle* are a respectful honorific for older people in general, not just relatives). Aunty D. and I had spent months travelling these mountains over the course of several years, gossiping in the car en route to digging up the past. On our long drives, she'd entertained me with stories from her early life and from the lives of her parents and grandparents. We'd found new stories to add as well, hidden in archives and memories. We'd been to funerals, church fairs, environmental rallies, charity fund-raisers, historical society meetings and countless family parties and barbecues. She'd schooled me in the network of kinship connections between herself and the other Ngarigo elders, and in the sometimes-delicate histories that threaded between them. Today was my introduction to other branches of the wider Ngarigo family and to her friends and colleagues who staff the national park.

After the lecture, the archeologist offered to show everyone how to knap a sharp-edged blade, the kind of simple single-use tool once made for 'on the run' jobs. A perfectly aimed stroke to a core, he explained, can knock off a blade in one hit. It looks simple, but meeting the exact right point with the exact right impact on the exact right stone is a skill that takes years to develop. After a demonstration (which failed) everyone was itching to have a go – both Ngarigo and park staff. While the crowd surged toward the outdoor area, Aunty D. turned in the opposite direction, heading for the tea and cakes. 'Aren't you going to watch?' I asked. She turned her lip up in derision. 'My old dad used to do that. I don't need some gubba telling me about it', she replied, and disappeared into the staff room.

Just as my own great Aunt's comment of 'taking up the farm' had caused the fault line of the past to fold in and around the grinding stone, so Aunty D.'s comment caused another cascade of meanings to dissolve and reform. She had told me stories of her dad, old B., many times, and we had visited sites of his biography: the now derelict hospital where a sporting accident had seen him laid up for weeks

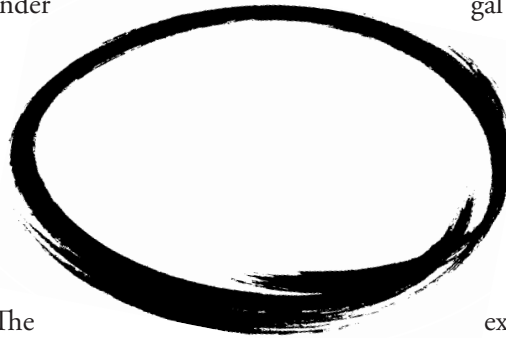
(which is where he'd met D.'s Ngarigo mother who was a ward assistant, so it wasn't all bad); the old milk bar in Bega with the only juke box in town, closed to Aboriginal kids – no blacks allowed; the old mission site of Wallaga Lake with its mysterious island ceremonial ground, where secret transmission of traditional lore was whispered ear to ear; and Jervis Bay, where perpendicular cliffs of sandstone fall 75m into the sparkling turquoise water, a favourite stop for whales on their annual northern migration and the location of old B.'s once flourishing commercial fishing operation.

Aunty D.'s dad was a Yuin man (close neighbours of the Ngarigo) from the coastal region south of Sydney. Yuin country, known these days as the Sapphire Coast, is a place of enormous natural beauty with some of the best swimming and surfing beaches in the world. Old B. had grown up on his traditional country and knew a thing or two about survival. He was by all accounts a crafty old timer, a formidable card player and an adept gambler on the horses. According to the story, he'd once come into a sizeable amount of money at the track, which he invested in a small commercial fishing vessel. He'd kept his family off the missions with the money he'd made from that little boat, and managed to employ a couple of his mates as well. To stay off the missions back in the day was an achievement. Keeping your kids housed and fed and out of harm's way in the face of state-sanctioned obstacles took a special sort of talent. And old B. had talent. I'd heard the stories of life on the bay more than once: of epic card games and family camp sites; of diving for abalone and cooking up damper; of kids and boats and cops and fish. And to fund it all, I imagined old B. working his charm in the wholesale fish markets in Sydney, where you need a quick tongue and a story to tell if you want to make the cut. He'd had talent, that's for sure. But I'd never heard of him knapping stone.

The archeologist giving the lecture had talked about silcrete quarries on the coast. 'Weathered lenticular layers, in some places up to 5m thick' according to his book, 'with signs of quarrying by Aborigines in detached boulders along the beach north of Bendalong'. I knew that area well but had never noticed the rock formations in any detail. I wouldn't know what to look for in any case. But Aunty D.'s comment made the penny drop. Quarrying on the beach! On the next bend around from Jervis Bay! Of course there had been quarrying on the beach. Stone knapping would have been a handy skill for a fisherman. If you knew where to land your boat at the spot where the silcrete bulged, you had a sharp blade whenever you needed one, which was probably quite often when your work entailed nets and ropes and lines. Suddenly, the fault line of the past cracked open yet again, revealing the fiction of what I had always seen as the set point for our origin story: the colonial boundary, first contact, occupation. It was clear what a fantasy it all was, the 'before and after' to which Aboriginal

people were subjected. Old B. didn't care if he was replacing the oil filter in his boat's engine or knapping himself a blade. He didn't stop to think about his transgressive engagement with technology - it was all in a day's work. And that's the way it was for so much of Aboriginal life. The great global histories of travel and discovery that both defined the modern era and began the 'new world' were not the main story for the people whose lives were so deeply disrupted. Despite the obstructions, oppressions and dislocations to which Aboriginal people were subjected on 'discovery', they kept on doing what they'd always done; marry, gamble, fish, play, joke, gossip, eat, grind, sing, winnow, dance, harvest, meet, hunt, love, fight and try to keep themselves from sinking under the rising tide. Old B.'s people had always used that fisherman's quarry, whether they rowed their bark canoe ashore or anchored their diesel-powered boat off the beach.

As I looked through the windows, I felt Aunty D.'s comment reverberate through the scene outside. The archeologist, the national park rangers and the Ngarigo elders were jostling and laughing, enjoying playing their game with the stones. But the currents of power and knowledge flowing underneath the group exerted their pull from the deep. Who here was the *expert* and who here *belonged*? Unlike the complicated interplay of history and politics going on outside, the story of Aunty D.'s dad was simple. It was merely of a man living and working in his own home, where he belonged, recorded nowhere by no one except in the memory of his now elderly daughter. And she sure as hell didn't need an archeologist to tell her about it.



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It was when I moved to Sweden several years ago that I began to think again about the meaning of 'belonging'. I had left my old home behind and despite the excitement of new discoveries, the move was tinged with a longing for my place of origin. But for where, exactly? My personal history is complicit in the wider history and politics of contemporary Australia, beginning with that red stone sitting on my great Aunt's TV. The past cannot be undone, but still...it raises the question for whose home exactly am I longing? That band of silcrete does not belong to me. But does following the diluted genetic trail of my illegal immigrant forebear lead home? There is no doubt I am a stranger in Scandinavia: my daily confusion - linguistic, culinary, administrative - confirms it. Yet my name and my colouring do not mark me immediately as an 'immigrant'. I can travel incognito (if I don't open my mouth) and life as an Australian expat is easier than most new arrival stories. But still, sometimes I long to be seen as the foreigner I am. And even more, I long to be 'home'.

My great Aunt's instinct about me and that stone were spot on: I would have driven it straight to the nearest national park in the blink of an eye, not caring that I was passing the problem on to someone else. She died a couple of years back so I suppose Len has it by now. I wonder what he's done with it? Maybe he's put it in a plastic box. Like us, it's caught on the fence strung between two histories; fenced in, fenced out, the objects of remembering and forgetting.

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Originally from Melbourne, Australia, Christine Hansen has lived in Gothenburg since 2011. She currently works as an historian at Gothenburg University. Her Formas funded research looks at the role of indigenous knowledge in climate change affected landscapes.

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