

Frontier Land:

Talbingo and the Changing Perspectives of Place

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The notion of the frontier is strongly implicated in the understanding of how Talbingo has been perceived over time. The catalyst for change has been the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. The Scheme created a fluid and transitional period, where the values and relationships of the people and land changed greatly. Out of this period, a new set of values, and a new sense of place were established. New modernist and nationalist values reshaped the land and silenced the old values of untamed wilderness and individuality. The old Talbingo was drowned beneath a lake, and the new Talbingo Township, was designed, built and populated by people from the Snowy Scheme. The landscape had been shaped in a new way based on the new values, and the sense of place which grew out of this was unique to the area and to that particular time. Yet, while in the previous frontier period, all earlier values and the sense of place had been suppressed or lost, the frontier created by the Snowy Scheme created a local backlash. While residents still held this new sense of place, the old values were not lost, and through publications such as Jack Bridle's "Talbingo", have remained strong. So while popular understandings of Talbingo through history books of the Snowy Mountains Scheme seem triumphant in their conquest over the landscape and people, later works show that this new sense of place is in fact a combination of old and the new values and concepts. Talbingo rose from its frontier period as a patchwork of past and future ideals. The national and local, community and individual, environmental and technological, instead of being segregated to distinct periods of time like before, instead melded to form a new sense of place which more appropriately accepts the past, while accommodating for the present and the future.

My family and I would spend our holidays at Talbingo, at least once a year. Ever since I had been little, the place was important to me. Here was a place which revolved around an amazing engineering feat. Just out of sight of the town was the power station with its huge pipelines and imposing dam wall. This was the Talbingo I knew, a town defined by the nations needs. The longer I stayed there, the more we got to know the locals. Some had worked on the Scheme in its construction phase; others still work on it now. Yet, some talked of what the town had been. Some spoke of how Talbingo would not be here now if it weren't for the Scheme, but others spoke of the river, and the small hotel and its pioneering clientele, and of explorers and settlers who had battled the land. I came to understand how there were several different ways Talbingo was perceived. It functioned solely for the Scheme, yet its original pioneer history had been subtly integrated into the town. Signs talking of the Scheme stood next to signs speaking proudly of Miles Franklin, and how far into the waters the homestead in which she was born now resided. The street names, all surnames of families which held a deep meaning for those who understood what they signified. My perception of Talbingo now is a subtle and intricate weaving of different histories, which instead of competing now acknowledge each other and the role they played in the district.

Despite the comparisons in the Snowy Scheme history books and how they connect the Scheme to the spirit of the original pioneers, the Scheme created a new frontier where the past concept and relationship of Talbingo's residents to their land was blurred, and drowned with the town. The Scheme histories try to shape the belief that there was no difference between the original white settlement frontier and the one which they themselves created. Deborah Bird Rose describes this action succinctly, "The frontier is a...place where modern culture simultaneously reveals its capacity for

destruction and reinvents its own myth of creation”¹. This is exactly what the Scheme did. Through its recreation of the area, they destroyed the communities and places which came before them, yet at the same time created an illusion that it was these very same people they represented. The truth is that the Scheme’s people were completely different to those who had originally settled there, their reasons for changing the environment were dissimilar, and the new relationship and concept of the land that they created were also completely different. History is written by the victors, and in this case the histories distort and justify their actions by portraying themselves as no different to those who populated the places that were drowned. Brad Collins mentions the isolation and resolution of the stockmen², and also how the Snowy mountains were a wilderness which had never been charted³. Oswald Ziegler proudly describes the first settlers and the Snowy Scheme as brave, adventurous, and strong in the face of the hardships⁴. Yet Talbingo was first settled by William Bridle in 1848⁵, and would not be drowned and recreated until 1964⁶. To compare the two events, which were separated by over 100 years, enacted for different reasons, and completed by different people as the same displays the new creation myth starkly. As with most frontier populations, those who colonised the area saw it as an unknown, wild place⁷. They only saw potential. By defining the land in what it could become,

¹ Deborah Bird Rose, “The Redemptive Frontier: A Long Road to Nowhere”, in Deborah Bird Rose & Richard Davis, ed.s., *Dislocating the Frontier: Essaying the mystique of the Outback*, (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005), p. 49.

² Brad Collins, *Snow: The Making of Modern Australia* (Canberra: Tabletop Press, 1990), p. 33.

³ Collins, *Snowy*, p.17.

⁴ Oswald L. Ziegler & Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority, *SnowySaga* (Sydney, Oswald L. Ziegler, 1960), p. 5.

⁵ Jack Bridle, *Talbingo: Miles Franklin Country* (New South Wales: Tumut and Adelong Times, 1979), p.12.

⁶ Siobhan McHugh, *The Snowy: The People Behind the Power* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1995), p.225.

⁷ Rose, “The Redemptive Frontier”, p. 49.

the past was destroyed⁸. By labelling it as such they ignored the way that the previous inhabitants shaped the land themselves. Nicholas Gill describes the pastoral relationship to the land as being created through observing or shaping the land⁹. This transition between concepts of the land occurs through the Frontier. It is where the boundaries of the conception of the land become mingled as the occupiers and the new settlers clash. Out of this clash, the majority of the time the previous concept will be suppressed, like Australia's indigenous heritage, and the drowning of Talbingo by the Snowy Scheme.

The histories written about the Snowy Scheme are key indicators of the change in the perception of the landscape. They tell you what they want you to know. The histories give the creation myth of the conquerors. They show the new perception of the landscape: national, empirical, controlled and modernised.

How does one perceive the place in which they live? To many the connection is a private one between yourself and the land which you inhabit. You shape the land so it suits you, so it complements your purpose. Even if you don't acknowledge it, there is a certain harmony in its habitation. The frontier that was the Snowy Mountains Scheme disrupted it all. New purposes, new visions of the land collided with the old. They intertwined until one was suffocated and disappeared. With Talbingo the Scheme disrupted the inhabitants' focus upon the local and individual. The greater purpose for the land created a new national perspective. Those who moved in acknowledged it, and worked for it. They did not see the town and the locals, they

⁸ Howard Morphy, "Colonialism, History and the Construction of Place: The Politics of Landscape in Northern Australia" in Barbara Blender, ed., *Landscape: Politics & Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 207.

⁹ Nicholas Gill, "Transcending Nostalgia: Pastoralist Memory & Staking a Claim to the Land" in Deborah Bird Rose & Richard Davis, ed.s., *Dislocating the Frontier: Essaying the mystique of the Outback*, (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005), p.78.

saw the potential and the end goal. The place was to service the nation through power and water.

Bridle speaks of how the focus of Talbingo before the Scheme was one which was personal. Everyone had access to water, through a personal water race which ran to from the creek to their house¹⁰. Every house had their own lighting plant, which usually was in the form of a petrol driven 32 volt generator with storage batteries¹¹. These people, while deprived of power from the national grid, and without water infrastructure of the like of most modern townships, shaped the land to serve their own purposes. Their relationship was an individual one. In other circumstances the relationship and perception of the land was one defined by community. The flat beside Jounama Creek was a favoured camping spot, and everyone had their own favourite place, which they'd return to¹². The people who lived in the town even named certain places in the river, such as Pulpit Rock, The Mill Pond or Island Stretch, a gesture which Bridle reflects made the river seem as if it was a living creature¹³. Such a comment reflects the respect the people had for the land. They perceived as a personal place, and had a close relationship with it, like you would a friend. It was so highly defined that it had become alive. Brad Collins argues that it was the uncompromising landscape, and the inability of those who lived in the Snowy Mountains to impose the European sense of beauty that eventually caused the inhabitants of the Snowy to appreciate its unique beauty¹⁴.

The coming of the Scheme was just like the coming of the first white European settlers. The first frontier, like the one the Scheme brought with it, was one where place was defined as wild and savage, and also by the absence of civilised man, which

¹⁰ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p. 67.

¹¹ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p. 67.

¹² Bridle, *Talbingo*, p.67.

¹³ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Collins, *Snowy*, p. 69.

therefore created living absences¹⁵. The histories of the Scheme reflect this similarity. Whilst all the books make reference to the wild and untamed landscape, there are few books which mention that Talbingo was inhabited. Most only mention the construction projects in the area.

Whilst Talbingo had been defined through personalisation, and through individual perceptions which created a relationship with the land, the Scheme created a new perception of the land which was national in scope. From the onset of the Scheme, different interest groups, as well as States and the nation, all clashed over who should benefit from the project. Sydney wished for the water supply, the Monaro wished for the power it would bring, and the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission wished for the waters to be diverted to the Murrumbidgee¹⁶. The Scheme, and the lands it was to be based in, were not perceived in a local way. Instead the focus was on how larger communities could benefit from places such as Talbingo. Even myths and lore which the locals used to define themselves and the area were changed by the Scheme so as to show a change towards a more national focus. One such example is ‘The Man From Snowy River Drives a Jeep’, by Graham Ride¹⁷. The iconic figure created by Banjo Patterson who defined a people as well as a country transformed into a figure who embraced a new national purpose of driving for the Scheme. Just as before, the conquest myth and the relationship the histories paint of the Scheme embracing the same values as the high-country men is shown here. “When on Kosciusko’s hills you see him drivin’, he never changes down however steep”¹⁸. Despite the changes the Scheme brought to the Snowy Mountains, the poem still portrays that the only change in the people who inhabit the area was their mode of

¹⁵ Rose, *The Redemptive Frontier*, p. 49.

¹⁶ Lauri Neal, *Cooma Country* (Sydney: Cooma-Monaro Historical Society, 1976), p. 251.

¹⁷ Neal, *Cooma Country*, p.263.

¹⁸ Neal, *Cooma Country*, p.263.

transport, and their job. Yet the Man from Snowy River now works not for his own gain, but for the gain of the nation. It was the graziers, upon whom the myth was based, who were the most vocal opponents of the scheme¹⁹. While this is mentioned, many of the histories talk away this opposition, by contrasting it with examples of those who lived their that did not feel threatened by this change in the perspective of the land. Collins mentions Herb Hain, who was deeply connected to the land, yet did not oppose the Scheme, as he always knew that the Snowy that he held dear was to have some value to the nation²⁰. Although this is the case, how certain can you be that this view was widely held? Surely there was to be a measure of pride in the fact that their own little personalised place was the focus of the nation and of such worth, but for those who lost their land in the Scheme, their views are silenced in the official histories.

Another change in the period of the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme was the way in which the landscape, although originally personalised and ordered to a settler's needs, would be ordered and fashioned in the name of modernism. This involved many changes. From the upgrading of the roads to layout changes in Talbingo. In Talbingo I stayed in the same house for over 10 years before realising its heritage. For me it had always been my family's house. It never dawned on me that there was a reason for why so many of the houses in the town were the same. Perhaps it was just a practicality, or maybe the builders only had a certain style which they built. All the houses placed in the new Talbingo Township were not the same as the ones which had populated the valley before the scheme. Unlike other towns that were drowned, like Adaminaby and Jindabyne, there was no deal to move homes from the valley to the new town. The houses were prefabricated, and built by

¹⁹ Collins, *Snowy*, p. 80.

²⁰ Collins, *Snowy*, p. 78.

the Scheme Authority to house workers on the Scheme²¹. The original homesteads which populated the valley, often made out of any materials in hand, had been destroyed and drowned, to be replaced with prefabricated homes which were exactly the same. Despite the appeal of a modern dwelling, some people balked at the idea. Betty Gibson remarked, “There were only 5 or 6 different types of houses. It was like Socialism”²². The perception of the land had changed greatly thanks to the uniformity and practicality of large-scale manufacturing. What had originally been so personal and individual became uniform and modern. It was another aspect of the place that the Scheme Authority had conquered in its imposed frontier. In a way it was a sense of ownership. While your own house in Talbingo before the Scheme was identifiably yours, in the new township there was little to claim as yours. The houses were often recycled and seen in many different Scheme worksites, and were seen as standard housing for the workers²³. I often wonder how hard it was for the people who first moved into the new Talbingo to establish individual identities, when there was such a level of conformity. They came from such a personalised setting, and had to try to relate to a new place which lacked any sense of individuality.

The Scheme had changed so much. People’s perception of place had changed from an intensely personal and individual landscape to which the inhabitants were strongly bonded, to a place which held a national significance and where all focused upon the Scheme. People lived in ordered streets, in the same style of Snowy Scheme housing, worked for the Scheme, and overlooked the water which had drowned what had come before. Perhaps it was this constant recollection that caused such a subtle change in the perspective of Talbingo. The dust had only just settled on the Scheme in the

²¹ Kirsty McGoldrick, *Snowfraus: The Women of the Snowy Mountains Scheme* (Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 1998), p.34

²² McGoldrick, *Snowfraus*, p. 34.

²³ Noel Gough, *Mud, Sweat and Snow: Memories of Snowy Workers 1949-1959* (Victoria: Noel Gough, 1994), p. 81.

1970's, and the frontier of the Snowy had coalesced into definite set of values and perspectives which shaped how people viewed Talbingo. Yet the dust was not settled long, and in a way it has not settled since. From the 1970's to the present day there is an ambiguity to how Talbingo is perceived. Before the Scheme the area was wild and untamed, and directly after the Scheme the town was ordered, uniform and controlled just like the water the Scheme diverted. Yet the more time passed, the more the perception was questioned, and the creation myths of the Snowy which had shaped perspectives of the land began to be challenged. It began with Bridle's book, "Talbingo". The book recounts the history of Talbingo before the Scheme, and also after it. Although he supplies pictures, Bridle does not explain what occurred in Talbingo during the Scheme. When reading it, the strength of the nostalgia Bridle writes with is powerful. There is a deep sense of regret and loss. For him Talbingo is a place which although it embodies the new values of the Snowy Scheme, it also has a past which he hasn't forgotten, and has instead chosen to memorialise. Bridle pushes for an understanding of Talbingo as a place which has both a national and ordered focus, but also an understanding of the people who came before. Yet although he seems to push for recognition of the past, there is a sense it is a form of grieving as well. "Old Brandy's Flat (may she rest in peace) Where we swam so long ago, Janey's Sams and Bowlers too, It hurts to see them go"²⁴. For Bridle, Talbingo has been literally drowned, and whilst the Snowy Scheme as the dominant party in the frontier tried to erase the past and create its own version, Bridle retains his old perspectives of Talbingo. He farewells Talbingo like he would a relative who has passed away: "So to my green Valley I say goodbye, Sleep well in your own cool

²⁴ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p. 68.

waters”²⁵. Yet even through Bridle admits the old Talbingo is gone, his act of writing the history of the town has memorialised it. He has given the concept of Talbingo another layer. Talbingo now has a past where it was fundamentally different. Unlike the previous frontier that Talbingo had been subjected to, the frontier created by the Snowy Mountains Scheme is different in the outcome. Previous frontiers see the old perceptions of place removed and replaced with the new sense of place that the dominant party brings with it. Yet in Talbingo, whilst this was the case for a short period of time, the aftermath of the Scheme frontier has instead brought ambiguity and a reflex action where the population fights to retain the way in which Talbingo had been viewed before. There are subtle hints around the town which Bridle mentions. Firstly, he refers to the street names, which in fact relate to the original pioneering families which settled in the area before the scheme²⁶. Street names like Pether, Bridle, Thomas and Ware, instead of defining the new modern Talbingo as cut off from the old place, create a connection and a reference. The new Talbingo in this way is neither a Scheme town or a Snowy town, it is a ambiguous and complex mix of the two. Bridle complicates this when he refers to the new Talbingo not with a sense of anger at the loss of his old home, but instead affection. “Although we are sometimes nostalgic for the old days, we who are left still say, Talbingo is the nicest place in which one could ever wish to live”²⁷. For Adaminaby, and Jindabyne, two other towns which were drowned by the Scheme, sources say that the people’s attachment to their old place diminished when they discovered the water sports and recreations previously restricted to the coast²⁸. Yet while there is some tourism business in Talbingo, this hasn’t diminished the melding of the old and new

²⁵ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p. 69.

²⁶ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p.70.

²⁷ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p.74.

²⁸ Collins, *Snowy*, p. 257.

perspectives of Talbingo. This resurgent strength of the old sense of place in Talbingo was not seen in Adaminaby. Peter Read argues this could be due to the residents being overwhelmed by the size of the Scheme and their publicity which diminished and devalued resident's connections with the land, leaving them bitter years later²⁹. He also argues that the Scheme's publicity machine attacked anybody who opposed the Scheme as unpatriotic and selfish³⁰. Seen in a frontier context, the more powerful invading side challenged anything which didn't match their own views. In this case, the resident's focus upon their place in terms of a personal and intimate relationship was seen as a threat to the national and utilitarian purpose the Scheme espoused. So why was Talbingo different? On the one hand, although Talbingo had residents before the Scheme, it was only extremely small. The new town was built for and populated by Scheme workers³¹. So perhaps with a community which was employed by the Scheme and who perhaps shared the Scheme's perspectives on the land, it may have been harder for a handful of residents to complain. Yet at the same time the outlet they created in the form of Bridle's book was a constructive way to reassert the old views.

The present Talbingo is an amalgamation of both old and new perspectives. Scheme signage in the town is placed next to signs reminding readers of what used to be there before the Scheme. In the hotel, there is a montage of the Snowy scheme, which displays the engineering wonder it is, and directly next to it is a hand drawn sketch called "The Dry Fly Man", which, a plaque notes, came from the old hotel before it was drowned. These displays, as well as the street signage, are probably the most open and recognisable reflections of the old and new perspectives of the land. It is respected for its wild and personal past, yet there is an acknowledgement and certain

²⁹ Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing* (Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 81-2.

³⁰ Read, *Returning to Nothing*, p. 82.

³¹ Tim Hall, *"Banjo" Paterson's High Country* (Australia: Angus & Robertson, 1989), p.103.

level of pride in the modernity and national importance the Scheme made the area. Yet this post frontier evaluation and amalgamation of the land and the changes which the Scheme has brought about is not just limited to Bridle's work, although it was one of the first to be published. Siobhan McHugh's book on the Snowy Scheme, unlike many books before it, pays close attention to the towns before they were drowned, and is the only book to mention the Scheme and Talbingo in great detail. She refers to Talbingo as a rural paradise, but also mentions the problems over compensation for land, which no other history addresses³². She notes that the compensation which the Snowy gave the people who lived in Talbingo was not as high as the residents wanted it³³. Even the perception of the value of land was different between the two cultures in the frontier, yet it took a book which combines both the old and new views of the Snowy to recognise this fact. McHugh while challenging some of the Scheme's practises, also judges some of the earlier resident's actions as less than desirable. She mentions that many residents wanted to start a brand new life in a brand new land, and therefore left many valued mementoes behind, an act she calls misplaced, and where common sense triumphed over sentimentalism³⁴. It leads me to question whether in fact there was a frontier at all. Perhaps the frontier has only been created in the books about the Snowy. While the histories of the Scheme create myths of creation, challenge and mute the histories of the old land they changed, little thought has been made to whether the residents were willing participants in changing their perspective of the land. Yet the ambiguous conceptualisation of land which arose after the Scheme still is founded on regret, nostalgia, and a more objective view of the past. Sometimes this nostalgia and regret is based not upon the jobs and other benefits the Scheme provided, but is based upon the regret for the damage the Scheme caused. For

³² McHugh, *The Snowy*, p. 225.

³³ McHugh, *The Snowy*, p. 226.

³⁴ McHugh, *The Snowy*, p. 227.

Talbingo it is the loss of the river which was like a living individual to many³⁵, which is similar to Claire Miller's work on the Snowy River. She writes of how the community finally began to challenge the Scheme due to the damage to the Snowy River³⁶. Here a shared local and national perspective has changed due to the Scheme, as the water hardly flows like it used to. While the nation still sees the river as a powerful force, the local inhabitants see it as almost empty and dying³⁷. So whereas Talbingo now has an integrated conceptualisation, the Snowy River remains a frontier, where local and national views still don't meet. It shows that despite this renaissance in reviving the lost past the Snowy Scheme drowned, for many places there is still no resolution.

Talbingo has gone through many changes. Originally it was perceived as a small pioneer settlement in the wild and unforgiving landscape of the Snowy mountains. It was a land which the inhabitants felt a personal and individual connection with. The frontier the Snowy Scheme created instigated a period of flux. Perceptions of the place as important on a national scale, and as tamed and controlled eventually drowned out the original perspectives. Yet with the end of the frontier, and the end of the Scheme, a resurgence of writings about these drowned places has revived the old notions. The result is a place which holds an identity which is neither exclusively old nor modern. Talbingo reflects what no other place in the Snowy Scheme managed to do regarding how it was perceived. Although viewed with some nostalgia, the town blends the old pioneering, wild and individual concepts which were partially lost, and melds them with the modern views. The result is a modern town which accepts the

³⁵ Bridle, *Talbingo*, p. 66

³⁶ Claire Miller, *Snowy River Story: The Grassroots Campaign to Save a National Icon* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2005), p. xvii.

³⁷ Miller, *Snowy River Story*, p. xvii.

Scheme, embraces its past and proudly projects this image to anyone who visits, and is willing to listen.

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