

FOUR BEAUTIFUL SEASONS TWELVE FANTASTIC MONTHS ONE VERY BIG YEAR

Ken Orchard: The Murray River, a personal view

This is the text of an address delivered by *One River* Reference Group member Ken Orchard at first of three *One River* Symposia, which will be presented under the banner of *Undercurrents*. This session was held in Goolwa SA, as part of the Regional Arts Australia national biennial conference *Kumuwuki*.

20 Oct 2012, Uniting Church Hall, Collingwood Street, Goolwa

People often ask me "How did you get interested in the river?" I first became aware of the river, stunned, on first crossing it at Murray Bridge in 1968, aged nine. I crossed it annually throughout my teens on summer holiday pilgrimages to my relatives' farm. They lived not far from Tailem Bend, from whence their water supply came via a three quarter inch pipe, across the sandy backblocks. Over the years we visited Bow Hill, Mannum, the Reedy Creek Falls, and the river hinterland on numerous picnics.

After completing art-school in 1982 a number of things coincided in connection to the river. I saw the 1986 exhibition, *Eugene von Guérard's South Australia* curated by the late Dr. John Tregenza for the Art Gallery of South Australia. Nearly two decades later I went in the artist's, and the curator's footsteps, in order to find solace for my loss, and to recast a number of von Guérard's Murray River subjects from the same vantage points and on the same mid-winter days of the artist's July visit.

Earlier, in 1987 I made a series of large scaled woodcuts, one of which was based on an 1861 drawing by von Guérard, a sketch for his well known painting *Mount Kosciusko* (1864), now in National Gallery of Australia. This work, *DGB16 f.54-55, (Vol. 12)*, representing the country high up in the Murray catchment, became a touchstone for other works made using the panoramic format.

The following year, in preparation for an exhibition at Oxford University to mark the occasion of Australia's Bicentenary, a previously unknown image of the Murray River was uncovered when conservation work was undertaken on the earliest river chart of the Murray River, which had been pasted down to a mount. The watercolour, made by Captain Charles Sturt on his party's epic 1829-30 explorative expedition down the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, was of compelling historical interest, not least for the fact that it depicted the expedition members and their humble whaleboat, beached on a Murray bank. It is among a number that represent the first European vision of the river, recording an historic moment and an environment, via the humble and strategically mobile medium of watercolour.

Following this came a period in the mid 1990s where, travelling in the wake of early river photographers G. Burnell and E. W. Cole, I commenced a research odyssey that continues to this day. All of these compounding intersections with the historical pictorial record of the river have left me with an unreasonable interest and consciousness of its importance then and its continuing significance now.

Visits to Lake Mungo (1997, 2005), having the good fortune to work with the late John Davis (1996), devising Black Swan/ Gannawarra (2003) to mark the sesqui-centenary of the commencement of steam navigation on the Murray, and most recently re-tracing sites where

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G.F. Angas produced works documenting Australia's first gold-rush, in the Macquarie River catchment, are all expressions of that ongoing connection to place in this riverine environment.

Early pictorial images make more comprehensible, provide a more humanized view of the river, different from the aerial views, satellite images and coloured diagrams and charts of the Murray/Darling system that assail us in the contemporary media on a daily basis. Animated weather maps, statistical charts, and the weather photos that badge our daily evening news reports all help to steer our minds towards our ongoing ecological, economic and lifestyle concerns for the river. But the many images of the river made by artists in former centuries are the ones that have helped to sustain my abiding interest in the river as an environment in which to work.

The Murray and Darling River system was a hot topic in the 1850s, 60s and 70s and beyond. These two rivers, and to a lesser extent their tributaries which fed them, were Australia's first super-highways, facilitating the flow of information, goods and peoples over the vast interior spaces of the colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Feats of frontier navigation were reported as prominent stories in the press of the day, and legions of men and women used the river to access the Victorian goldfields, open up country for settlement, and develop townships.

Some river captains, who aided and abetted this colonizing, became by-words on the river, perhaps none more so than Cockenzie born Scot and long time Goolwa resident, Captain George Johnston, who earned the nick-name the "Murray River spaniel", as he saved so many floundering souls from drowning in its turbid waters.

In the nineteenth century legions of explorers, artists, and photographers captured the river in images, and provide us with vital evidence of the importance of the river in the ongoing formation of our national identity. Gifted views photographer Nicholas Caire has left us with some of the most incomparably poised and memorable photographs of the river, such as those of Echuca, Tooleybuc, and on the Edwards River.

Other photographs, such as those taken by Charles Bayliss on the Darling River in 1886 were a visual demonstration of progress and industry, providing invaluable information to Governments and city-based policy-makers, and documenting the superabundance or the absence of that most precious substance itself - water.

Yet other artists captured its frontier moods and its indigenous inhabitants and their lifestyles in engravings, made after sketches and photographs, that appeared in contemporary newspapers. Such images functioned as visual reports on frontier life when few in the city were unable to easily access the river, or had witnessed such scenes.

Our passion for the river system and the sweep of land that it represents - as an ongoing site for visualization, and consciousness, as well as a source of wealth, is one that has sustained itself across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and into our own. We need to be reminded often of its profound importance to the ongoing livelihood and health of our nation with ever more urgency.

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Ken Orchard is an artist, curator and researcher with a long-standing interest in the visual history of the Murray-Darling Basin. Now based in Adelaide, he has been involved in many events and symposia with a focus on the river system. Ken was the winner of the inaugural *Fleurieu Biennale Prize for landscape art* (Water category) in 2006 (Goolwa Arts Centre), and his collaborative touring exhibition *Prospects: re-imaging gold country at Ophir & Hill End* (with Ed Douglas) was a component of the *Just Add Water* program for the 2012 Regional Year of Culture (Signal Point Gallery, Goolwa).