



GREG LEHMAN

Greg Lehman is a nationally recognized Aboriginal (Trewulway) writer, researcher and curator, whose PhD examined the representation of Tasmanian Aborigines in 18th-19th century colonial art. He has written, "...watercraft weren't introduced to Tasmania by Europeans, but were preceded by a distinctive maritime technology developed by my Aboriginal ancestors involving canoe/ catamarans made from reeds and paperbark". His project will offer an opportunity to reconsider traditional accounts of Tasmanian history through references to historical imagery and material evidence that are an indication of the strong continuing traditions of Aboriginal cultural production.

Mum was born in 1920 in Longford, a country town just out of Launceston in the northern Midlands of Tasmania; her father had worked first as a farm hand, then as a farm manager in the district, and when she was twelve. Mum went into service as a domestic help working at a number of the big estates in the area, among them Entally House and Mountford (where she was born). Dad, Wesley Lehman, was born in 1830 in Ulverstone on the North West Coast and lived his whole life there. After leaving school he was apprenticed as a pastry cook, but after that term he ended up working at the Department of Main Roads as a bulldozer driver.

At the age of eighteen, after he and mum had got together, they left for Sydney for a kind of working holiday where for a while Mum worked at a kiosk at

Circular Quay and Dad worked as a barman. During the 1940s and 50s people had to travel where the work was and just made the best of it. When Mum and Dad returned to Tassie and started their family; my sister Toni was born at the hospital at Wynyard.

Mum's family had descended from a convict named Richard Chugg – he hadn't been one of those "but he only stole a potato" type of convicts - he'd been involved in a murder; Mum's mother's maiden name was True, and that side of her family had come from Ulverstone as well. Dad's father arrived as a German immigrant to Tasmania in 1855. My father's mother's ancestry was Aboriginal and Irish; that's the lineage my own Aboriginality comes from.

While I was growing up Mum and Dad both worked as shift workers at the Edgells factory in Ulverstone; a food-processing factory locally referred to as The Cannery, even though by the time I came along, the move towards deep frozen food meant that there wasn't much canning being done. In those days Ulverstone had a population of around about eight thousand people, and was one of the bigger rural towns on the North West coast. Mum and Dad did rotational shift change-overs at The Cannery, which meant that I spent a lot of time being looked after by my sister Toni, who is eight years older than me, and a local woman called Pat McCullough, who had a family of her own, and who worked as our babysitter. Those were hard years of work for my parents – poor Dad's body clock had to be readjusted every three weeks when he was required to change to another shift cycle.

My brother Ricky left school at fifteen to take up a panel-beating apprenticeship in Burnie and my sister got a job in Myers in Melbourne when she was fifteen; I was the first in the family to finish high school and go to College. Mum and Dad had decided to send me to a Catholic High School in Burnie. Dad's mum Nana Lehman was a fairly strict Catholic, so we all went to Catholic primary schools, but the prospect of going to the Catholic high school was terrifying to me. I'd ridden my bike to school from about grade three right through primary school – my bike was the centre of my universe then – with other kids I'd be riding to town, through bush tracks, to the local beaches - it was a feeling of freedom that soon shut down with the prospect of having to take the forty-minute bus trip to and from the school in Burnie.

I did pretty well at primary school – I'd won some writing prizes, so I probably had it in my mind that my parents had seen that the Catholic school might give me a better chance. It wouldn't have cost them too much – probably around thirty dollars per term for school fees - and the school buses were free. High school was OK – I made some good and enduring friendships that continue to the present day, but it took a long time travelling to and from school. I didn't get home till 5.30 at night, and in winter I'd be leaving in the morning and returning at the end of the day in darkness. That removed me from the local social environment of the other Ulverstone kids... I just wasn't around to do all the after-school things anymore. I would be catching the bus in the dark in winter and going home in the dark in winter.

My earliest memories of talking about our Aboriginal ancestry came at the end of primary school – some of my cousins were dark skinned, but we never actually talked too much about things in detail, although during the early 1970s we were all aware of a lot of political change that was going on across the country: Charlie

Perkins' Freedom Ride was getting a lot of publicity, and Prime Ministers Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser introduced a number of education programs focused on Aboriginal people. At some stage during this time my family was contacted about support programs to support and assist Aboriginal people. I was the only one in the family who directly availed of this; I can recall getting an allowance to help with books and uniforms every month.

At that time, my family was also contacted by Bill Mollison. During the early 1970s he ran a department called Environmental Psychology at the University of Tasmania. Later on, Bill became famous for his promotion of permaculture, but his project at the University of Tasmania focused on researching the family histories of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. He did a travelling tour of the state piecing together the family histories of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. That research helped leverage my thinking about my own family's ancestry and what it might mean. It happened at a time of life when you start thinking more about group identity and belonging and that's the point at which I began to seek out more and more detailed information in my attempt to make sense of what being a fair skinned, blue eyed Tasmanian Aboriginal person might mean. The 'official' history, of course, had taught that Trucanini had been the last surviving Tasmanian Aborigine, but at that time all of that assumption was being overturned.

During my years at high school I also experienced sexual abuse, events that have left all kinds of scars and residual feelings. The impact of such experiences is enduring – they leave kids more vulnerable to anxiety and depression and, in later life, relationship development is also affected, so of course that's one of the most prominent things I associate with memories of my high school years.

In terms of academic life at school, my strength lay in the sciences – especially with biological science, and that's where my real interest lay, even though I did well in English. When one of my teachers asked me what matriculation college I'd be thinking of enrolling in, the consideration that this could actually be a possibility for me hit me for the first time – I'd already been applying for jobs as a farm hand for when I left school. Even so, I knew I didn't want to stay at Marist College. Luckily there was another alternative – Don College in Devonport, and so as a consequence I spent the next two years travelling by bus to school for the same amount of time, but in the opposite direction from Burnie. In Devonport I was able to concentrate on the subjects I enjoyed so much – Chemistry and Biology, some Religious Studies, English, Art. In year twelve they were changing the curriculum, so to my delight I was able to take up four Biology subjects! At



some time towards the final year, when the question “What are you going to do at Uni?” came up, it just seemed impossible to consider. I hadn’t even travelled as far as Hobart at that stage, but a bit of urging and encouragement from some of the staff and from my parents, together with the fact that some of my friends were going to go to Hobart for university, convinced me, and the following year I found myself sharing a house with a group of friends at Sandy Bay, enrolled in a Bachelor of Science at the University of Tasmania.

I didn’t enrol in the course with any particular kind of career in mind. But it was possible to apply for a Teacher Studentship, where you could complete a Bachelor of Education while you were doing your course at Uni. I’d done some teaching in primary schools and loved it, but when they offered me a high school science studentship I hated it – it was too close to my own experience. If they’d offered me a primary school studentship I would probably have still been there, enjoying a successful and rewarding life ... but I wouldn’t have ended up the person I am today.

After I was offered that studentship I didn’t want, I applied for a job at the State Library as a photographic technician in their Archives Section. When I didn’t get it, I decided to just focus on Biological Sciences, following my passion. But as I was completing my degree, I’d come to know a number of Hobart-based Aboriginal people. The Commonwealth Department of Education and Youth Affairs, through the Commonwealth Employment Service, offered me a one year trainee job as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer. It involved visiting Aboriginal kids in schools and finding out whether they needed support at home or individual tuition. That was in 1984, and at the time there was an increase in initiatives aimed to improve the educational success of Aboriginal people. After that I applied for another job with the Australian Electoral Commission – they were offering a program that aimed to increase knowledge of electoral processes in the community and encouraging members to enrol to vote. I spent the next few years running electoral programs in schools; describing, for example, how the

House of Representatives and the Senate worked. After that I ended up going into a mainstream role and became the Electoral Commission’s Education and Training Officer for six years.

During those years I was socially and politically involved with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, an organisation that promoted land rights in Tasmania and had centres in Hobart, Burnie and Launceston. When the Royal Commission for Deaths in Custody was established, I was approached to apply for the position as a Research Officer based at the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre. I worked there for twelve months researching the experiences of Tasmanian people in the Criminal

Justice System, and preparing a report.

Following that there was a move, championed by Jim Everett, to form a Land Council in Tasmania. We drafted a constitution and elected a Committee, and over the next couple of years I worked at establishing the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council. In 1991 we moved into an old office above a shop in Hobart. We started from scratch; we painted it up and cleaned it, bought and borrowed a range of old furniture and an old photocopier and worked out ways of getting funding to employ some staff. One of the first initiatives was to set up a training program for Aboriginal Heritage Officers working alongside while at the same time advocating for land rights in Tasmania. We were successful in moving an Aboriginal Lands Bill into Parliament during a Labor government – the first Land Rights bill to pass the Lower House – but it was defeated in the Upper House.

I then had another change of career – as you might have guessed by now, I’m not a care and maintenance person – I like new initiatives. I was asked whether I would apply for the position as the leader of the University of Tasmania’s newly established Riawunna Centre of Aboriginal Education. I worked there for ten years, starting as the Head of Aboriginal Student Services and ending up as Director and then as Research Associate. During that time I continued my involvement with Land Rights and community politics.

In 1995, the Aboriginal Lands Act was passed through Parliament, resulting in twelve areas of land in Tasmania being transferred to Aboriginal Community ownership. It was largely symbolic in one way, but more importantly, the result opened the way for the community to become more closely and practically involved in heritage and land management issues.

But by 2002 I felt that I needed a complete change ... all these ‘battles’ had been demanding and hard-going. There’s a phenomenon referred to as burn out and that’s what was happening to me at that time. I knew someone who owned an advertising company specialising in ‘public good’ advertising, and for the next two years I worked as a copywriter, writing ads for products and the promotion of things like health and safety in the workplace, anti-smoking campaigns and the like. I’d always been interested in creative communications, and had always had an interest and fascination in jingles and slogans. I’d taken a fifty percent pay cut to take up the position but I really enjoyed it – it was my first experience working in the private sector. I worked there for two years and when I was headhunted for a State Government job to run a public relations campaign to develop new Aboriginal Heritage Protection legislation, all the experience in the advertising company paid off. I worked in that role between 2004 and 2006.



After that I was head-hunted for job as Manager of Aboriginal Education in the State Department of Education, running curriculum development and education and student support programs. So in a sense I found myself back in the world I'd started in, in 1984! I was there for five years and during that time I moved into a Policy Analyst role and then I applied for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra as an Indigenous Research Fellow.

In 1995 I'd returned to university to undertake my Honours in Environmental History, around the time I was working on the Lands Rights programs. My thesis was on Aboriginal Land Management. My First Class Honours enabled me to enrol in a PhD at AIATSIS. During the third year in Canberra I was awarded a sponsorship to go to Oxford University to undertake a Masters. My PhD topic focused on Visual Representation of Aboriginal People in Colonial Art, but I was conscious of my lack of a strong disciplinary base in history and art theory. The Roberta Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation offered a scholarship for Aboriginal people to study at universities around the world, so when my application was successful, I asked for permission from UTAS to enrol in the Masters at Oxford while I was still enrolled in the PhD in Canberra. The Master of Studies in the History of Art and Visual Cultures at Oxford was a twelve-month coursework Masters with a dissertation. I focused on Benjamin Duterrau and studied portraiture and post-colonialism in twentieth-century art and medieval landscape painting. I was able to harness all this research to enrich my PhD thesis.

I'm interested in how things fit together – I'd looked at land and country and history, but it had always seemed to me that while all these things are important, there was something else that was informing and guiding and influencing, and that the driving force was visual history. And I guess it's that interest in visual and textual rhetoric that gets into our bones – that might have been what led me into advertising – a lot of our knowledge comes from visual sources. Every time I saw an old colonial painting I was totally engrossed – I wanted to know answers to all kinds of questions the image raised: who did what to whom, where it was painted, what was that person doing at the time it was painted? And, ultimately, how did that artist want to depict that person? This big question about personal sovereignty is not ever completed in this business – we are influenced, inspired, conditioned, cajoled and pushed into all sorts of ways of thinking about ourselves – just like that person in the colonial painting: it came from a sketch of a real person, but that original figure gets placed in an other – in another's world. Our experience of cultural identity today is a bit like that. And that's what I'm really trying to get at with my

postdoctoral research now – I'm moving the analysis into the twentieth century, as a way of continuing to try and unpack all those influences on how we see ourselves and how others see us.

With the luxury of the setting of the PhD, I also had the opportunity to make things again ... When I was younger I was often drawing, and I've been keen to make art again ... through photography and sculpture. I have a notebook list of things I want to make – that I'm trying to work through. As a kid I was always making things out of wood and drawing – making sense out the world by putting things together and shaping them rather than writing about them. When I was younger these things were simple – boats and bits of furniture or learning how to pull a pushbike apart. They were often practical things – right now I'm interested in trying to see how those things might combine in new ways.

What makes where you live and work different? (to a metropolitan area/to other regions you've experienced)

Tasmania is, more than anything else, an island. I was born here and, back in those days, the locality was everything. By my teenage years, once I had started to explore the north west coast a bit, it was the region that defined my sense of home. Now, having travelled the world, one might think that my sense of home has expanded to encompass the continent of Australia - or even the South Pacific or South-East Asia. But no; the shoreline of Tasmania has contained my sense of who I am and how that is connected to a place. It is the shoreline and the knowledge of how it encircles me.

What might make it difficult?

This island is bounded by more than sea. The perspectives, aspirations and vision of what seems to be the majority of its residents are also bounded; by a sense of disadvantage, of feeling threatened, forgotten or hard done by. There is a default defensiveness. A shyness of what unbounded imagination might offer. The island is bounded by small town thinking. To step out of those bounds is to experience a kind of ostracism. It's as if once you step beyond the bounds of familiarity, you are not allowed to return as the person that you were - you are not allowed to continue to be who you were, and still are.

And where do the other challenges lie?

When a place like Tasmania works so hard at being insular and distrustful of the outside world, it can only be expected that the world reacts in turn. To be recognised as Tasmanian is to be perceived as something that you have been forced to leave behind. This leaves many of us in a strange nowhere land between the home we once had, and the home we have dared to imagine for ourselves. It is a place of estrangement - a penalty for transgression.



But are these challenges worthwhile?

These challenges are inevitable if you are willing to live the life that you aspire to, and to realise that the things that make a place a home are not democratic. They are personal - an external manifestation of your sense of self, your spirituality and your way of being in the world. The number of people in your life who understand and respect this are few. But they are the people who you can truly love.

And what kind of benefits are there?

A knowledge that you belong somewhere. And that you are not alone in the world.

Do you think that galleries and the artistic communities around them (the artists, designers, arts workers, volunteers) have shaped the local community? To what extent?

Galleries and the artists who fuel them sometimes make a recognised impact, shaping the thinking of the local community. More often, their contribution slips quietly into the consciousness of the population - often unrealised or acknowledged. There is a quiet satisfaction in this.

Did you ever envision yourself living and working in a place like this?

Always.

How does it feel now?

Exhausting. Exhilarating. In Tasmania now there is a sense of becoming. We are all working harder than ever to make the most of this. It is an opportunity for powerful change - for transformation. It's starting to feel like a home that I never imagined.

What relationship does 'your' place have to the general scene in metropolitan-focused art in Australia?

It is a distant relationship in many ways. Our more commercially successful artists have galleries in Melbourne and Sydney or internationally, but it's also possible to be reasonably self-sufficient here - not to easily make a living from creative practice, but to keep busy and do what you have the impulse to do.

Is it cheaper to live in the regions?

For some things. It's cheap to buy locally grown fruit and vegetables, it's easier to grow your own food than if you live in a big city. It's possible to gather shellfish and other traditional foods without having to travel very far. Supermarkets are more expensive. And petrol. There's lots of free entertainment and art - especially since MONA came along.

Do you think it's important to 'get out' from the regions and come back in again?

Yes. Some of our greatest artists are those who have come here from elsewhere. They didn't have to leave in order to 'come back'. Many artists find a natural place for themselves here for some reason. Maybe it's the air,

or the water. Or maybe it's the Country speaking louder here than in many other places. This is a place that hasn't been over-run. The Old People were alone here for a long time. We have not had hordes of invaders, one after another like Europe has. I think that leaves the Country fresh and generous. It has not been so despoiled as many other places in the world. I wish more people would understand that. The land here is kind and welcoming. That's why strangers arrive and declare that, for the first time in their lives, they feel 'at home'.

How important are region-to-region contact and relationships?

The most important aspects of culture and knowledge are local. Regions are comprised of constellations of locality. In this way they are a bit like a city that is made up of suburbs, but in regions the linkages are more natural and have evolved gently around rivers, tracks and coastlines. While city dwellers insulate themselves from nature and Country, regions are in its thrall. They feel and see the changes of the seasons and understand more of the reality that we are part of these cycles and natural systems. Creating links directly between regions is a necessity. It allows locality to engage directly with its diversity in other places. Brokering those contacts through cities dampens and filters those important relationships - it commodifies them and turns them into a currency that has value in the urban, but misses the point of the local.

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