

can be seen clearly from the debates surrounding the Mabo and Wik decisions of the High Court, Australia is a 'settler-state' and the struggle to dominate land and culture is still at the heart of the Australian ethos. For many Ngarrindjeri people, the Hindmarsh Island bridge represents a further assertion of settlement. For many Ngarrindjeri women and men, it threatens to desecrate a significant religious area. Kumarangk stands at the gateway to the Coorong and the heartlands of the Ngarrindjeri people. Doug Wilson, a senior Ngarrindjeri man, encapsulates the crucial cultural importance of areas such as the Coorong for the Ngarrindjeri: 'You know we got something special in the Coorong, the Ngarrindjeri ... You feel when you go over the other side suddenly you got no worries in the world, you feel if a weight has been lifted off your shoulders, you feel free.'

The Coorong is symbolic of survival for Ngarrindjeri people. Although only 200 kilometres south of Adelaide, the area has resisted large-scale settlement. Jacob Stengle's paintings reveal the enduring Ngarrindjeri spirit that inhabits this apparently colonised space [246]. For Ngarrindjeri it contains the spirit of freedom from dispossession and oppression. They have continued to express their cultural identity and envision their relations to others (including the Australian state) through their artistic traditions. The Hindmarsh Island case has provided Ngarrindjeri artists with a potent icon through which to explore the frontiers between Indigenous culture and the state.

The Hindmarsh Island issue raises challenges for many Australian institutions—museums, universities, the legal system, Australia's official history, and the Australian nation itself. None are left unscathed by the questions it raises. The system of heritage legislation, the legal system, and the academic disciplines that claimed to specialise in an understanding of Indigenous culture generally failed to address adequately the popular assumptions of white Australia about culture, authenticity, and legal rights that were highlighted by the Hindmarsh Island controversy. The negative focus on Indigenous culture, central to the Hindmarsh Island debate, prepared the way for the conservative federal government's reaction to the High Court's Wik ruling and proposed changes to native title and Indigenous heritage protection legislation.

In raising questions about Indigenous culture, the Hindmarsh Island issue became part of a much broader debate about Australian identity and the legitimacy of the Australian state in relation to native title. The interface between Indigenous people, government, and development is a crucial site for the invention of Australian identity. The millennium, the native title debate, and specific issues such as Hindmarsh Island came together at a crucial time, when Australia was re-shaping itself in readiness for a possible republic and a new century.

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246. Jacob Stengle,  
*Hindmarsh Island*, 1996.  
Acrylic on board,  
145 x 122 cm.

Berndt, R. M. & Berndt, C. H., *From Black to White in South Australia*, Melbourne, 1951; Kartinyeri, D., *Ngarrindjeri Anzacs*, Aboriginal Family History Project, Adelaide, 1996; Langton, M., 'Urbanizing Aborigines: The social scientists' great deception', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1981; Mathews, J., *Commonwealth Hindmarsh Island Report*, Adelaide, 1996; Stevens, I. E., *Report of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission*, Adelaide, December 1995; Tindale, N. B., *Journal of Researches in the South East of South Australia*, vol 2, Anthropology Archives, South Australian Museum, 1934–37.

## 20.4 Tales of Torres Strait: The historical novel and localised memories

In 1933 the prolific Australian author Ion Idriess published *Drums of Mer*, a novel set in the Torres Strait Islands in the nineteenth century. This popular novel, I would suggest, has had greater impact on Yam Island people than its anthropological cousin, A. C.

Haddon's six-volume *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits* (1901–1935) [see 7.1], and constitutes an important source of cultural and historical information. It is, however, only one of the many means by which Yam Island people have been able to construct a strong sense of themselves as a unique people, and as members of the Australian nation state.

Some literary evaluations of *Drums of Mer* describe it as having limited merit, as being racist, and as representing Torres Strait Island people as savages, and whites as inherently adventurous and civilised. Despite being shunned by literary critics, many of its author's books were very popular; as late as the 1980s, Idriess remained the single bestselling author on Angus & Robertson's list. Referring to his popularity in Australia as a whole, David Foster quotes Idriess as saying: 'the public ... liked my books, each year they could depend on getting life in some wild part of Australia they knew nothing about and was quite different from the other parts. That was one of the secrets of my success.' In my research in the Yam Island community, begun in 1980, I was many times directed to this book. Initially uncertain why people were equating a novel with 'history', I began to understand much later that the stories Yam Islanders tell themselves, and others, are their history, and that the storytelling component of *Drums of Mer* warranted exploration. The contemporary use of this novel by some Yam Island people, especially men, constitutes one of the many means by which they articulate to themselves and to others who they are and where they have come from. It remains an important document, through which they have come to know themselves, White Others, and their intersecting pasts in the nineteenth century.

As a story, the novel could be cast as 'history', particularly since *Drums of Mer* is a colourful embellishment of known historical events and characters drawn essentially from Haddon's *Reports*. Before they were reprinted in 1971, the latter were virtually impossible for Islanders and non-Islanders alike to access, and remain difficult to acquire. The novel, on the other hand, has been reasonably cheap and quite accessible to Torres Strait Island people since the 1950s. While the *Reports* have had limited popular appeal on Yam Island to date, it is not simply the availability of *Drums of Mer* that accounts for its popularity. Rather, it is the form of narration that renders its contents a meaningful, believable, and authentic representation of tradition. Haddon's *Reports* and *Drums of Mer* are not competing representations of nineteenth-century Torres Strait—one as predominantly truth and the other predominantly fiction. Instead, one is the romanticised refraction of the scientific other.

Idriess was indebted to the *Reports*, and re-presents some of the material collected by the expedition. In this sense, his book is derivative: it can only exist in relation to the Haddon texts, which likewise can only exist in relation to Torres Strait Island people's culture and history—as recorded and recreated in the nineteenth century. Like Haddon and his team, Idriess drew upon the knowledge, experience, and interests of the resident missionary William McFarlane, to augment his material and facilitate his entrée into Torres Strait. In his Author's Note to the *Drums of Mer* Idriess says: 'This story is in all essentials historical fact ... Ethnologically, too, the story is correct. Here, I am greatly indebted to the splendid *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait* and to that living mine of Torres Strait ethnological lore the Rev. W. H. MacFarlane [sic] ... who put me in personal touch with the Island historians.' McFarlane himself says in the book's foreword that '*Drums of Mer* comes with very strong appeal. There are some who may think that Mr Idriess is giving us simply an imaginative picture, but the author has travelled the Strait with the discerning eye and contemplative soul of the artist who is satisfied only with first-hand colour, and who, while blending history and romance with subtle skill, at the same time keeps within the region of fact.'

It is precisely in the way Idriess blends and blurs, manoeuvring himself and his characters ‘within the region of fact’, that the full impact of his narration is felt. He re-presents the substance of the *Reports* in the genre of the historical novel, brimming with romance and adventure, while at the same time authenticating it with photographs of known individuals, places, maps, cultural objects, and regular references to explorers. These inclusions add to the level of uncertainty for the reader about what is purely imaginative as opposed to what is more firmly realistic. To add to this skilful blurring of artistic and historical conventions, the author’s voice interrupts at regular intervals, bringing the audience back to the present. This device of collapsing the twentieth century into the nineteenth is a direct address to the readers, drawing upon their familiarity with the history of colonialism in Torres Strait. In addition, the hero Jakara, a white castaway, regularly anticipates the future by referring to historical events which are known to have occurred after the time of the novel.

Part of the success of *Drums of Mer* stems from Idriess’s memorable storytelling. Moreover, his recounting of events and persons in the past closely approximates the traditions of Yam Island storytelling (*yan stori*), through which Yam Islanders are placed in the past and the present. In Idriess’s narrative the same effect is achieved. While the novel is not about Yam Island—most of the action takes place on Mer (Murray Island)—there are enough references to significant places, people, and events to attract the Yam Island reader and to enable some to say their culture and history are represented in it. All Torres Strait Island people know about the two spiritually powerful drums of Mer, in the eastern islands, and a book with such a title is immediately enticing. From the outset, Torres Strait Islander readers can anticipate a story about themselves and their spiritual power.

During the nineteenth century ‘semi-ethnographic’ novels replaced the ‘fabulous travel account’. The device of mixing historical realities with imaginary events allowed the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’ to be exaggerated. This is certainly an effect of *Drums of Mer*, for both ‘us’ and for ‘Torres Strait Islander’ readers. The representation of the Islanders as fierce, beautiful in their physique, preoccupied with magical power and warfare, as a world unto themselves (albeit on the cusp of dramatic social change through the increasing incursion of powerful outsiders), is an image which delights a Yam Islander readership. They can see it as a portrayal of themselves, and their Meriam neighbours on Murray Island, as potent and impenetrable [247].

Yam Islanders, I suspect, see themselves as central subjects in this story. The novel tells of Kebisu, the iconic chief of the Yam-Tudu people (who have not lived on Tudu since the end of the nineteenth century), who engages in power plays with C’Zarcke the awesome Meriam priest, with their central island neighbours, and with the whites. Idriess renders Kebisu impotent in the face of change, but I do not think Yam Island people attend to this reading of the narrative. Tudu is never far away, and the inclusion of a photograph of Maino—a descendant of Kebisu—bridges this time of Kebisu to the recent past. In 1981, for instance, a woman explained that Idriess had visited Yam and referred me to the photograph of her great-grandfather, Maino.

In this story Yam Islanders, through their ancestral heroes, are cast as savage selves against savage yet fundamentally weak whites. They see the castaway Jakara as being so terrified of the power of the Meriam priests and of being forced to do the dance of death, that he escaped. And yet this semi-ethnographic novel does more than exaggerate difference; it transforms the Torres Strait Islanders of Haddon’s *Reports* into individuals by breathing life into them. The text evokes the past through the senses, and celebrates it. Idriess fills out the characters with imagined intentions, emotions, powers, and sexuality, in a plot which borrows from the *Reports* and from his own imaginative repertoire. Individuals and events are created, embodied, and placed within a social landscape in which



247. Cover of Ion Idriess, *Drums of Mer*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1933.

Yam Island people feel at home. This physical and emotional anchoring of the novel's characters—black and white—authenticates the tale. By bringing some of the data from the *Reports* back home, *Drums of Mer* finds its mark, and this helps to account for the referential and authoritative position the text occupies for some Yam Island people. It operates as a mnemonic device, triggering memories and the imagination.

Torres Strait readers see *Drums of Mer* and its Torres Strait Islander protagonists C'Zarcke, Kebisu, the Pretty Lamar, and Beizam as standing outside, and in opposition to, European society. This particular past, with these places, these people, and these practices as related by Idriess, constitutes an important point of reference for Yam Island people. In this history, Yam Island people see themselves as opposing the increasing presence of white invaders from the sea, while being intrigued by and envious of their obvious power; they see themselves as actively incorporating some of the foreigners into their own society, but on their own terms.

The fact that Kebisu and others participate in a coherent story, in which people are accurately located in place and time, gives *Drums of Mer* an orthodoxy and authority. Idriess romanticises a particular era in Torres Strait history drawn from the *Reports* and from Torres Strait Island people themselves. In attending to the way in which Idriess uses *yan stori*, the impact of *Drums of Mer* for Torres Strait Islander readers can be approached. Edward Said reminds us that it is through stories that 'colonized people ... assert their own identity and the existence of their own history'. Through this particular story, some Yam Island people can be seen to be doing precisely that.

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## 20.5 Aborigines and cars

As a potent symbol of modernisation, the motor car may have an ambiguous status for Aboriginal people. The car can be associated with the modern fact of dispossession, certainly; but it may assist in the repossession of country, too.

The Aboriginal road narrative—a genre constituted in some recent cinema [see 13.1] and literature in Australia—provides a focus for the ambivalent role of the car, especially in relation to the law, as in Phil Noyce's film *Backroads* (1977). In Ned Lander's film *Wrong Side of the Road* (1981), old Holdens are central to the lives of Aboriginal rock groups, No Fixed Address and Us Mob, as they go on tour [see 15.2]. The Aboriginal road narrative can end by having its characters drive away, as Lander's film does, or it can end abruptly—as in Archie Weller's novel, *The Day of the Dog* (1981) [see 14.1], based in Perth, which concludes with a high-speed police chase and a spectacular car crash. This Gothic, moralising account places Aboriginal youth firmly on the wrong side of the law and sees the heady freedom associated with the car as leading inevitably to arrest, closure, and fatality. Certainly this is an available narrative for expressing the misfortunes of modern life for young Aboriginal people. Steve Mickler has looked at newspaper reporting in Perth of Aboriginal youth gangs in the early 1990s, showing that the *West Australian's* claim that 'more than half the young criminals caught in high-speed chases by the police are Aboriginal' is perfectly consistent with a media-orchestrated racism which scapegoats these groups as urban, joyriding terrorists. A lighter account of an Aboriginal man's relationship to his vehicle—still on the wrong side of the law—is given in Aleks