

The Bundian Way: Mapping with Stories

John Blay

Abstract—The Bundian Way is a shared history pathway that connects the highest part of the Australian continent and the south-eastern coast via an ancient Aboriginal route that brought together the people of the greater region. The Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council has long worked towards its use for educational/tourism purposes and recognition for heritage protection. In 2010 the Land Council began a survey of the route which resulted in New South Wales State Heritage listing on 18th January 2013. While the Bundian Way is defined as a physical route, its stories link a variety of Aboriginal landscapes through time and space. For example, some special places along the route are suited to formal Aboriginal Place recognition. These are all significant places with strong, inter-linking stories. Therefore, though the old song-stories that identified the route have partly been lost due to the impact of European settlement, even today the richest way to map the route is through story. Not with a physical map, but a mental one, one you can carry in mind. As it was in the beginning, before history arrived with the Europeans.

Introduction to an Ancient Pathway

I'm going to tell you some stories about the Bundian Way. That's appropriate because the Bundian Way is a story in itself, one that is long and unfinished, and made up of many strands. My aim here is to map its progress, through some fragments and shorter stories, in the hope that this will be helpful to those who might follow. Our mapping of the landscape has many layers. My part in it really started when I first met BJ Cruse, Chair of the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council, more than 10 years ago. I was working on a South East Forests history project that covered vast tracts of national park and wilderness in the bottom corner of the Australian continent, to the east and south of its highest point at Mt Kosciuszko. Part of the project involved mapping the old Aboriginal routes of passage. BJ expressed his enthusiasm for a particular way that ran from the whale



Figure 1—New South Wales State Heritage listing was granted in January 2013 and a line has been identified to appear on maps as the Bundian Way.

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places of Twofold Bay to the high country of the Australian Alps where the old people used to gather to socialise, trade and have ceremonies in the summertime when the Bogongs were present. These moths were roasted to provide a food for the gathering that was good to eat and nutritious.

We soon became good friends and worked together in a spirit of brotherhood to find whether there was part of the network of ancient pathways that was still in a suitable state for recognition. He mostly attended to the Aboriginal cultural side of the ancient pathway while I looked to the shared history. His people, the Aboriginal people of the south east, are also known as Kooris. They have occupied the country since the Dreamtime. An Aboriginal presence on the continent stretches back beyond 50,000 years. The Kooris have modernised along with the rest of Australian society, but during the C19th they were wrenched from their traditional way of life by European settlers and then, during the 1880s and 90s, they were forcibly removed from their traditional lands onto missions and government reserves where travel was restricted and the old customs and languages were banned. But in spite of the heavy-handed efforts of government, the Kooris and their culture have survived. Our aim was that recognition of a route might provide a focus for the expression of Koori culture and Country. And also, as a public walking route, it would tell the story of European settlement along the route and the history of what happened to its Aboriginal people.

Targangal

My first walk in Kosciuszko National Park reveals the high country as a reflective place, intensely beautiful, dramatic with constantly changing degrees of light, its beauty nonetheless haunted by ever-present threat. Even on a blissfully sunny summer day, the blizzards can suddenly take command. Snow sweeps the landscape in front of winds that can bowl you head over heels.

The old Aboriginal people treated the high country snow-grassland with the gravest respect, visiting reverently when they ventured there after the Bogongs that massed in the westerly facing granite crags for a summer time aestivation. It is quite amazing to consider that as you pass the Bogong places of rocky North Ramshead at about 2000 m, the landscape and wild vistas would look much as they did a thousand years ago. Here you've moved beyond the ant-trails that direct so many visitors through townships from one tourist destination to the next, and the bustling of tourists recedes from consciousness. For the next one third of the Bundian Way, through Kosciuszko National Park, a distance of more than a hundred kilometres, you cross only two public roads.

Of all the places along the route, and I have now walked it many times, I find the Great Divide near Targangal (one old Aboriginal name for Mt Kosciuszko) the most enchanting. In spring and summertime, there are slowly melting patches of ice while the ground in between reveals a rainbow mat of



Figure 2—Through Kosciuszko National Park, a distance of more than a hundred kilometres, you cross only two public roads.

alpine wildflowers. It makes a seriously wonderful walk—perhaps wander would be the better word—of about a half day. Or a day, maybe two. A week there would be even better. And it's never quite the same from one moment to the next.

Naming the Bundian Way

After some initial explorations, as we have done so often, I sat down with BJ to figure out how to deal with findings that we considered quite remarkable. From all the evidence, we believed we had found pathways that were many thousands of years old, far older than the Pyramids or the Silk Road. These paths have many names: mountain passes, walking routes, dreaming tracks, roads, songlines, routes of passage, transhumance, traditional routes and so forth.

In the 1820s and 30s when the European pioneers arrived in the SE region of Australia they found the rugged, deeply dissected mountainous country of the coastal ranges a barrier to settlement. Produce of the Monaro, for example, was too difficult to get to market without roads. Travelling and sending freight by sea required access to the nearest harbour in Eden. The old Aboriginal clans of the region came to the rescue and showed their ancient pathways to the settlers. These became the first roads. And not only did the Aboriginal people show the settlers the best travelling routes, they also showed them the best places to establish their farms. 'Why it was the blacks, and nobody else who opened up the country...' said Bernard O'Rourke, one of the first to settle the region in 1843. 'They led him, and you, and everyone else here and there.' He also told how, in the days of earliest settlement, the blacks would tell of a potential station and the settlers, always keen to increase their landholdings, would follow. Soon enough the promised land came into sight, and there the land grabbers pitched their tents and regarded this as sufficient proof of their ownership (Young 2005).

It was a story repeated up and down the Australian coast. We considered the main routes of the region to decide which one might be the best preserved. Like the rest of Australia, the region had a complex network of pathways that linked everywhere to everywhere else. Our first task was to sort through options until one route emerged that had been changed the least in almost 200 years of settlement. Most of the routes had been changed utterly, highwayised, fenced off, built upon, intensively farmed. Walking them I found one that followed an old pass leading from the tablelands to the coast through the wild SE Forests. It was the one furthest south, closest to the wild country around the New South Wales-Victorian border, the one referred to by W.B. Clarke who described it as the Bundian Pass in reports during his geological explorations of the Monaro in 1851/2 gathered in his 1860 book, *Researches in the Southern Gold Fields of New South Wales*.

After much further consultation, and sorting through the names of other parts of the route, we settled upon the Bundian Way as a name as it best describes how the route goes by way of the ancient Bundian Pass.

The Bundian Way, a shared history pathway, formally starts in the high country of the Australian Alps on Targangal and runs another 330km to Bilgalera, on Twofold Bay (Tullamuller). It brought together the Aboriginal people of the greater region, most notably for ceremonies associated with whaling in springtime at Twofold Bay and

moth hunting in the high country during summer. If I were to express its route in a simple story song, it would go: from Targangal pass just to the north of the Pilot, just to the north of Tingaringy, just to the north of the Delegate and then just to the south of the Coolangubra, follow the ridges around Balawan to the sea.

Many say it is one of the best walks in the world because it is the most varied, running as it does between the highest point of the continent and the coast, and especially because of its extraordinary story. Along its route no day's walk is quite like the next. Some are so different it's as if you have stepped onto a different planet. Having now followed it many times, my excitement levels rise just thinking about it. There's so much to it, so much to see and do. So much that is way beyond the ordinary.

BJ Cruse sees an important role for the Bundian Way. 'It is,' he says, 'all about connection.' And I realise that I most feel connected to that country through the Aboriginal vision, past and present interwoven, with my civilisation like a gloss on the surface. That's how I have now come to understand my country. It's the way that rings truest.

In some parts we find how the old pathway is still close to its original form. BJ says the route should be more widely acknowledged; protected from being bulldozed during fire emergencies, for example, or turned into roads. 'That's the sad truth,' he tells me. 'Today some people would recognise the Bundian Way by covering it with bitumen, whereas the old Kooris could recognise it in song. We've gotta protect it from people who don't understand.'

When I speak with the Elders about what should be done, and we consider the possibility of seeking heritage recognition, Uncle Ossie Cruse says, 'It's there. It's always been there. We know that.' He pauses, searching the far distance before turning to directly engage my eyes. 'What means the most to us is the kinship. It's what connects us Kooris. The way's a symbol.'

When I ask Ossie who owns the route, he responds that, 'We all do. Or nobody does, unlike the way Europeans own their land, we're custodians of it. We have a responsibility to look after our part for future generations... You see, we're all one family round here, we're all related. We're proud of what we've got. Sometimes we fight, but we all get on together again afterwards. That's the way things are.' (Blay 2013)

And so we set about the long and arduous task of gaining heritage protection for the Bundian Way: the cultural stories to be told by its Aboriginal people, shared history to be held in common.

In December 2012 it was entered on the NSW State Heritage Register, both for its Aboriginal and European and shared heritage values, and published in the NSW Government Gazette on Jan 18 2013 (viewed online on 15th June 2013 at: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5060185>).

Ingegoodbee

Further eastwards, lush-green grassy flats along the Ingegoodbee River tableland are such that it feels as though you've come into a Shangri-La. Five star camping places abound. It's friendly, and marvellous. Dingoes howl from range to range by night. Emus strut by day. Soon the walk joins the route followed by surveyor Townsend in 1842,

during the first European survey of the region, when Aboriginal guides showed him this route through the ranges from Omeo. It is as far from settlement as it was in the mid-1800s, and yet it is the easiest way to walk from Omeo to the Monaro. Like many parts, this section of the ancient pathway is still trafficable and recognisable and quite easily followed. Thick scatters of stone tools litter the ground at the best stopping places. Our route leads to the Nine Mile Pinch, a vertiginous descent from the high plateau of the Ingegoodbee to the Snowy River.

As you leave the tall Mountain Gum forest, various animal pads converge. This is the ancient route, along the top of a long ridge that winds all the way downhill over some eight kilometres (nine miles, it was guessed by the old cattlemen, who gave it the name) in distance and an 800-metre fall to the Snowy River. As the vegetation changes, the track tilts more steeply downwards, and does so with a vengeance. There are the markers of Byadbo: blue leaves of the Snowy River Wattle, then Box and the White and Black Cypress. And breathtaking views as you overlook the steep, rainshadow country with its desert-like scenery. This vision is as scary as it is beautiful: it says, stick to the way or face deep trouble.



Figure 3—Aboriginal guides showed this route to surveyor Townsend in 1842, during the first European survey of the region. It is still the easiest way to walk through the rugged wilderness country.

Management

The management of the project, another vital part of the greater story, came about with a great deal of cooperation and assistance from Aboriginal community members and Elders. Uncle Ossie Cruse saw the potential benefits from the beginning and has been a leading light. I was elected as the Bundian Way Project Manager by the board of the Eden Local Aboriginal Land Council in 2006. The land council has worked vigorously to develop the project, which has its headquarters at Jigamy Farm, on the Princes Highway near Eden. This will become the gateway to the Bundian Way and serve as information and culture centre, and the management base for all operations. But the land council soon realised it could not achieve its ambitions for the project on its own. The administrative task was simply too great.

Conversations with other agencies of the region brought representatives together and a steering committee was established to assist in management of the project in September 2010. The aim was to involve all stakeholders and the strengths of this committee saw it evolve into a formal management advisory committee with a membership of community organisations, state and federal agencies of the region and local government. Other organisations attend meetings on a needs basis. All have made a solid, usually voluntary, contribution. In 2012, a Strategic Plan was finalised. It began:

Our mission:

To provide and develop a unique shared cultural, physical and spiritual journey. The Bundian Way maintains the integrity of Aboriginal cultural heritage. The pathway promotes and empowers shared cultural understanding as well as harmonious appreciations of cultural differences through genuine partnerships. The Bundian Way empowers people to come together to undertake a challenging physical and intellectual experience. (Bundian Way Management Committee 2012)

The Snowy River

The Snowy rises on the slopes of Kosciuszko and loops north and easterly thence through a gorge before it heads southerly to arrive at its junction with the Pinch River, or where, in Aboriginal terminology, the Moyangul meets Nurudj-Djurung. There are great camping spots here, always have been. For all its wildness this is such special country it does not surprise me when I find it must have, at times, bustled like a city. The signs of its Aboriginal occupation are everywhere.

More recently, this countryside was much loved by horse-men of old. Its rocky steepness seems threatening at first. But it stays warmer in winter than the Monaro or high country, and was hence much sought after by the cattlemen for winter grazing. In camp near the river, you feel comfortable, sheltered. Emus, like prehistoric beings, wander freely. The granite soils are reddish, crystalline, soft, and make the hills glow like ochre. Trees on the hillsides are mostly the native cypress-pine, which look like surreal blue-green Christmas trees, presenting scenes I've found nowhere else. And the Snowy here has been rejuvenated in recent years so that it can still crash and thunder after the snow melt and

fill its gorges with tumbling waters which echo through the peaks of the Byadbo Wilderness. It is a great place to ponder how the Bundian Way plugs into the deepest recesses of the Australian heart.

The Man from Snowy River, written by Banjo Patterson in 1890 when there was still direct memory of the first European settlement in the region, is modern Australia's best known poem. The bush ballad is still regularly recited in pubs and schools as much as it is around the campfire. Its legend resonates from a particular place, where a young horseman, a stripling, is challenged by the wildest of landscapes:

Through the stringybarks and saplings, on the rough
and broken ground,
Down the hillside at a racing pace he went;
And he never drew the bridle till he landed safe and sound,
At the bottom of that terrible descent.

His daring and courage carry him through by dint of skills and local knowledge. Its setting lies deep in Australia's mythical heartlands.

Today that landscape of the imagination is still an unpopulated and challenging place. One road runs through the vast wildness of the lower Snowy. It is a dirt track that descends from the tablelands into a veritable bowl, over a kilometre deep, carved by the river and populated by a most unusual flora and fauna. The country for as far as the eye can see is part of Kosciuszko National Park, a proclaimed Wilderness Area. But before the coming of the white men and their horses and livestock, the area hummed with a very different life.

In 2010 the Land Council began a survey of the Bundian Way to identify the route and its Aboriginal landscapes. After very considerable consultations and research on historical, natural and Indigenous values, the survey team with up to five Koori personnel walked the 330km length of the Bundian Way in legs of up to 8 days starting on 11th October 2010. It was an intense healing experience for all involved. Many parts, especially those in remote declared wilderness areas covering half the route, had to be visited again and again to clarify details and establish the old pathway route (Blay 2012).

We started on the Snowy because the high country in October was still under snow. We were immediately surprised at the regularity and quantity of evidence (including artefacts) along the route, and it became clear that the Bundian Way should be regarded as a single site. Artefacts appeared less frequently in places where roads had been engineered and least frequently near sealed roads. Nonetheless, artefacts were not the only indicators of the route. Other matters considered included historical writings and maps, as well as stories, oral history and surveyors' scarred trees and journals.

The signs are everywhere to see: artefacts, scarred trees, food plants and such. This is where various ancient pathways crossed over. It lies at the heart of the Bundian Way.

The ways the old horsemen used to go, we confirm, follow the much older Aboriginal routes. Many today claim links with The Man so that they can put themselves forward as latter-day persons from the Snowy River. It remains, after all, Australia's strongest and most persistent myth. It has inspired not one, but two movies. The ethos captured in the



Figure 4—The legends of the Snowy River still echo through the peaks of the Byadbo Wilderness.

poem is of someone prepared to break away from the mob to follow his own heart and instincts, of knowing the country better than anybody else, of being more at one with nature than the rest; it's the story of the little man triumphing against the odds. That runs against a history where it's usually the big man property owners who are recognised, whereas the main players were more often their employees and contractors.

In fact, Byadbo bears more than a passing resemblance to Banjo Patterson's scene:

...And down by Kosciusko, where the pine-clad ridges raise
Their torn and rugged battlements on high,
Where the air is clear as crystal, and the white stars fairly blaze
At midnight in the cold and frosty sky...

Aboriginal friends give me the precise genealogy of one horseman. That Man from the Snowy River must have been a Koori, they tell me. Who else could have done what he did? Who else would have known the country so well? Maybe we should rename him the man from the Nurudj-Djurung.

Byadbo

The Bundian Way quite sensibly follows the old routes. It doesn't gung-ho through the landscape the way a map or GPS might tell you, but moves quietly the way human feet like to go. It heads southwards along the Snowy for about eight kilometres before crossing the river near Sandy Creek to head directly into Byadbo. This is the way surveyor Townsend came in 1842, and trees he blazed with a scar every mile can still be found. Along the river there are impressively tall Yellow Box, White Cypress, Bundy and White Box in groves where the ground is covered with Australian bluebells, and elsewhere the cypresses grow huge. Nor does the way here follow the routes awkwardly made by modern machinery. What it amounts to, in brief, as I wade the Snowy to come into Byadbo, is one of the most extreme, most dangerous, most interesting and most thrillingly beautiful walks imaginable.

The route goes for over fifty kilometres without guarantee of water through parts wild and steep. Snakes are plentiful: Tigers, Browns, Blacks and Copperheads. Spiders such as Funnelwebs even manage to survive the desert conditions. Do you need to be mad to go there? No, I say. It's the most rewarding walk I've ever done. You just have to prepare yourself.

Crossing from the catchment of Sandy Creek to Sheepstation Creek you follow the ancient path beside an old-style fence made from the cypress logs without nails or wire. An old horseman told me it dates from the 1840s and the Ben Boyd era, when there was grass aplenty. The big spreading cypresses are certainly the oldest. Some have been dated to over two hundred years ago. (Pulsford 1991)

One day while surveying the route in Byadbo we spy a cat in a tree hollow that has to be a domestic cat gone wild as we are fifty kilometres from the nearest house. The old tree has a number of hollows above ground level. Some of us reach into the hollows as far as we can to try and grab it, without success.

A few hours later we come back along the same route and again spy a cat in the same tree. This time I prepare to photograph it, but just as I press the shutter, the cat appears to fall from the tree. Strange. We go over for a closer inspection and find the cat dead. It is a young one just about ready to

leave the nest. Then a little further away there is another dead cat. And another. As we stand round the tree, suddenly, a large, highly venomous Tiger Snake begins climbing the tree. Blind to our presence, manic, it plunges into one small hollow, comes out another, then dives into the next...

The crew suggest I put my arm in to see whether there are any more cats.

The Monaro

When I finally come out of the sharp slopes of Byadbo onto a plateau where the Monaro begins, I find the Merambego grasslands. It's a shock, for now at last other people figure. But it's so out of the way it's like being on the outer rim of civilisation in a Mad Max sort of place. What now? I wonder, as I look down along the dirt track that will lead me through grassy flats back towards the 21st century.

But it's not long before a very large flock of emus and mobs of kangaroos bring renewed enthusiasm. Merambego is where the many forests meet, on the far edge of the Monaro tablelands. During the all too frequent droughts of the region it can look desolate, but the native grasslands need only a little rain to transform the countryside. Then yam plants like Early Nancy, Vanilla Lily, Bulbine Lily and the orchids proliferate. Seed-bearing grasses paint the ground many hues of green. There are still a few Koalas, although Brushtail Possums are present in remarkable numbers. The sheer number of artefacts tells how fully this country was once occupied by the old Maneroo people.

From the Byadbo Gap it's not hard walking through the basin of hilly grasslands to McGuigans Gap, a high grassy ridge from which exceptional views take in the landscape all the way back to the high country. A little-used country road then winds through an open forest of pale gums beside the spring-fed Wollondibby Creek and the route begins to flatten.

Although the extensive old Corrowong grazing run has gradually been whittled down, it nonetheless remains a vast and impressive sight that takes in the most southerly of the Monaro region's treeless plains. The countryside is now less extreme in its topography and the grasslands and grassy woodlands show how the land was before the settlers came. Somehow, as I walk, I am haunted by visions of the oldest inhabitants. I imagine them with their numerous campsites tucked along the creek, in the sunniest places, not too far away from wood and game. I can even imagine their much-favoured 'rabbit rats', now extinct in the area, which perhaps were bandicoots or some other little hopping marsupial like the Rufous Bettong also known as the Kangaroo-rat.

And it can be such hard country. Its colours can run through green to golden to white. There's either too much rain or not enough. Graziers here have been at the mercy of rainfall and geology no less than the old Aboriginal people, however, the old traditions without land ownership and barbed wire allowed more flexible ways to inhabit the country. The Maneroo, as its Aboriginal people were known, were not stuck in the wrong place at the wrong time. My walk has become a meditation on nature and the land, it is as if I am becoming at one with it.

Progress towards Delegate is for the most part through grassy woodlands where the predominant tree is Ribbony Gum, majestic and spreading, often standing in groves where the white trunks contrast with a darker stocking. The way

focuses my attention on the nature of things as each new vista opens up. Old Travelling Stock Reserves mark some of the places where the old Aboriginal people used to camp, good places near water and firewood, that will hopefully be made available to walkers.

After Corrowong Creek, the next important stream is the Delegate River.

Delegate

Delegate is the hub of the Bundian Way. So little has changed in recent years it seems I have been transported back in time. This is the only town along the route with a hotel and shops and accommodation and a remarkable history. As a bonus, since late 2012, it hosts the Bundian Way Aboriginal Art Gallery.

In about 1827 Delegate Station became the first European settlement of the Monaro and its treeless plains. At that time the tablelands held very abundant resources. Springs were common and well maintained by the Maneroo. It is rolling land, covered with grasses that soften the roundnesses to a human appearance. Towards the edges and on some hills there are trees. Its food sources included kangaroos, wallabies, emus, wombats, echidnas, and all manner of small macropods like the potoroos, pademelons, kangaroo rats and bandicoots. Koalas sometimes wandered the grassy plains and in other places as many as four to a tree. The possums were plentiful also, in fact the Maneroo deliberately made fires to hollow out trees and make them more suitable for nesting by possums, of which there were numerous species that included Greater Gliders, Yellow Bellied Gliders, Brushtails, Mountain Brushtails, Ringtails and Sugar Gliders. Forests in the Coolangubra were found during the 1980s to have the highest level of arboreal mammals in the world. The fur of the Greater Gliders was much sought after for making cloaks. Fish were in plenty. Delegate River was famous for its blackfish. Yabbies inhabited the many ponds, waterholes and swampy areas along the creeks. There are still yabbies in the swampiest country. Bustards or wild turkeys were common. An emancipated convict, Joseph Lingard, reported in about 1840 how 'the river was covered with all kinds of water-fowl. I could take my gun in a morning and shoot as many as I liked (Lingard 1846).' The food plants included many forms of yam and tuber, leafy stems, fruit and seeds of innumerable species. But during droughts, trampling by settlers' stock began to compact the dried mud and this meant many potential foods—including the frogs and eels and lizards and snakes, not to mention the edible plants—found survival more difficult.

The settlers aimed at increasing the land's carrying capacity for their animals and crops, whereas the Aboriginal methods provided continuing sustenance from what was already there. Yam sticks loosened the soil in places. Fire was only one of the tools used, but it helped focus kangaroos into burnt areas to make hunting predictable. The various patches of woodland, White Sallee and peppermint for example, still have discrete clear areas from the old fires. The clearings a few kilometres apart are where, after the hunt in one place today, the kangaroos could be found at the next grassy patch tomorrow (Gammage 2011).

The track passes easterly through the grizzled peppermint forests of the Irondoon Range, and then down to the river

and the goldfields of Craigie. When the alluvial gold seemed to peter out, the field was left to the Chinese who had their own ways of finding the remaining metal, and it became Chinatown. Few signs of gold rushes remain, apart from pock-marked river flats. Craigie is a cluster of houses with a pine-plantation back-drop and a public hall. Platypus are commonly seen from the bridge across the Little Plains River.

The exhilarating walk from Craigie leads through low hills along a winding country road lined with old trees and grasslands. It passes old places with evocative names like the Pipeclay Ford on Jacksons Bog, Duiguds Bog, past the handsome grass and woodlands of the Mila Travelling Stock Reserve, to the Gulgin or Rock Flat and another old wayside resting place reserve.

The Bundian Pass

The Bundian Springs were part of a greater Aboriginal landscape across the Gulgin flats that included ceremonial and women's places. Many yam plants still grow there, those with edible tubers include twelve species of lilies and orchids, including a large population of the now regionally rare Yam Daisy (Nyamin or Murrnong), making it the most remarkable yam garden I have found on the Monaro. This is undoubtedly a classic example of the Aboriginal Landscape, one which contains not only a good sample of the original flora and fauna, but also a great number of food plants and artefacts. With Aboriginal people demonstrating its value as a campsite, it became a wayside resting place in 1872 for the use of travellers and bullock drivers. It was simply the best place to stop and camp the night at the top of the long uphill route that rose from the place mapped as Boondiang on the first primitive sketch of the region by surveyor Stewart Ryrie.

After Delegate, you see regular glimpses of a wild mountain range on the eastern horizon. The dark peaks of the Coolangubra present a very clear obstacle to further progress in a direct easterly direction. Indeed, the difficulty of finding a way through the tall forests, precipitous slopes and scrubby gullies that plagued the early Monaro settlers in their quest for a road to the port of Eden immediately confronts you at Gulgin. But it is from here that the Bundian Way begins its descent from the tablelands to the coast via the Bundian Pass. Our route slides to the south, immediately below the threatening mountainous chain. This is country where you find the most majestic of tall eucalypt forests. The route fords the river to cross a gap in the hills to another Sheepstation Creek (entirely different and so much greener than the one in Byadbo) where there are swampy areas and grasslands. The route is there on the oldest maps and its location was described to me by Harold Farrell, an old dingo trapper from the region, noting, 'It crossed Sheepstation just below the Swamp, where the old bullockies from Nangutta put in a stone corduroy to make the crossing safer. From the swamp it went up the ridge beside the Surveyors Gully...' (Blay 2013)

This is the foot of the Bundian Pass, a major Aboriginal place once described as 'the most important Aboriginal artefact site on the far South Coast of NSW' (Glascott 1987), where, over a very long time, many people had rested following their descent from the tablelands. It was once a major thoroughfare for the region. In the era of the automobile it had been by-passed and almost been forgotten.



Figure 5—The great eucalypt forests of Australia's south east, proposed for world heritage in 1982, are exemplified along the Bundian Pass.

Towards Balawan

And then, striking out for the coast, the route follows a very old track through the grassy Stringybark forests of the old Nungatta run. It follows a long ridgetop, and still appears as the old pathways did: 'like a road,' because they were used and burned regularly. The forests show a variability, often with trees of remarkable girth and height. And there are many very special camping places. The fauna is

also special. In the evenings or early mornings many species of possum might be seen, not to mention potoroos and bandicoots. Koalas were here in plenty once upon a time and may yet reappear, any sightings are welcomed. Our route crosses Nungatta Creek, then along another ridgetop to the head of Pericoe Creek, and comes on to the Towamba River at the small township of Towamba. The walk to Bilgalera on Twofold Bay then continues through the tall forests around Balawan (Mount Imlay). A most worthwhile detour climbs 500m to the summit from which there are views so breathtaking they left me dumb-struck. It is as though you are looking directly down upon Bilgalera, the destination of the Bundian Way. Carpeting the forest floor is a massed understorey of a white and pink flowering endemic shrub, *Boronia imlayensis*. The colours, the trees and aspect amount to nothing less than a once in a lifetime experience.

Bilgalera

From Balawan it's a pleasant, mostly downhill walk through the forests to Bilgalera (Fisheries Beach) on Twofold Bay. This is an Aboriginal Place, where an education centre is proposed, and there are plenty of excellent camping spots behind the dunes and beside a peaceful lagoon. Then, the walking route proceeds around the bay to Eden. Vistas with mostly red and orange stone formations make a truly wonderful and very colourful walking experience.

Bilgalera is a place to be explored, not only for its Sea Country attractions like the Weedy Sea-dragons, but also its tall forests and littoral rainforest. It is a bountiful place to mark the eastern limit of the Bundian Way. Nonetheless, the most remarkable aspect of Bilgalera is its stories.

When the artist Oswald Brierly painted the scene at Bilgalera in bright watercolours he showed various trading and whaling vessels at anchor while crews busily loaded and unloaded supplies. A whale spouted across the bay not far



Figure 6—Landscapes of the eastern limits of the Bundian Way look back along its route to reveal many important cultural places, including Balawan, Kiah Inlet and the Whale Beach, now proposed for recognition as Aboriginal Places.

away from where a traditional Aboriginal family stood on the rock shelf from which plentiful shellfish were gathered. Behind the beach lay fresh water. On 14th August 1844, he drew a small sketch of natives dancing by firelight in his journal and recorded an event of some very great substance. The Protector of Aborigines for the region was his guest. G. A. Robinson also wrote at more length than usual about the remarkable activities at Bilgalera, with some telling details of the gathering:

This evening went on shore in South Twofold Bay and witnessed a very interesting corroboree [sic] by the Maneroo Natives, they were on a visit to their coast friends to introduce it, was composed and arranged by Al.mil.gong, an Omeo Black from Tongio-mungie. There were about 60 or 70 Blacks present including the Twofold Bay. Number of whales were on shore ... (Clark 2000).

This is a story that is central to the Bundian Way. During his walk from Omeo to the bay Al.Mil.Gong would have covered close enough to 400km, much of that distance along sections of the Bundian Way.

And there are many other stories that relate to traditional practices around the bay. Some feature the relationship between the old Aboriginal people and Killer Whales (Orcas), which assisted them in hunting whales, a practise that continued in partnership with European shore-based whalers. This was, apparently, the only instance in the world of a wild species cooperating with man to hunt another wild species, (Clode 2002).

Aboriginal Places

The Bundian Way today is not only a route to be walked. It is a story that is composed of many strands that weave together to form a necklace laid over the landscape. New South Wales allows the recognition of Aboriginal Places, kinds of mini-national parks, which are 'a way of recognising and legally protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage. Under

the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act, any land may be declared an Aboriginal Place if the area "is or was of special significance to Aboriginal culture" (<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/conservation/AboriginalPlacesNSW.htm>). And we currently have in progress numerous nominations along the Bundian Way with an aim that these will be like pearls threaded in the necklace, places with the highest values that can be used for education and conservation but especially as places where a story brings indigenous cultures into focus. Our understanding of the country has many dimensions.

Stories, in my experience, are the most vital and appropriate way to reveal the magic of the Bundian Way. Fundamental is the story of Al.mil.gong's new corroboree in 1844. Another is W.B. Clarke's record of the Bundian Pass. They better give the sense of it than strip maps. How much more interesting to follow the stories?

Accounts from the cusp of settlement, when the traditional lifestyle began to change, enable us to see the stages of colonisation. And by the same token, as the shared history stories unfold over time, we see the resilience of the Aboriginal culture. Other stories are revealed in the ways that traditional management have influenced the appearance of the greater landscape we see today. It was here that scientists in 1992 proposed World Heritage recognition of its great, diverse eucalypt forests (Costin and Mosley 1992). The stories also animate landscape in the walker's mind, they show its circumstances through time, and form the impress that can guide and ensure its management. They are the key that links past and future, and promise much for the Aboriginal people of the region, especially in the sense of the desperate need for cultural healing and learning in Country. As they come together in the Bundian Way, they also bring recognition, jobs in tourism and natural resource management and new insights for culture-based storytelling. Perhaps most importantly, this can result in better understanding and reconciliation with the broader community (Blay 2013).



Figure 7—The yamfields at the Bundian Springs, an important part of the route's stories, were surveyed for their part in women's business and continue to be studied scientifically to ensure sustainable management.

In following the Bundian Way step by step the stories gradually reveal themselves. Its landscape has many aspects that are illustrated by the stories. They allow other stories to be told. They fix the route in the mind. Your way becomes an odyssey. And so you readily rediscover nature, and respect for it, not by following lines on a map but by becoming part of a greater engagement. But no matter what part of the route we follow, when I am walking it with Aboriginal people, we invariably find yet another special quality to our way, some new magic. Walking the distances involved becomes less of a chore than a light-hearted movement of the spirit. Indeed, we have discovered whilst walking the old route that somehow it sings to us. If by chance in the wild country we come off-track, we can tell. A short backtrack, and the lightness returns again. We are on track. The songs are in the air and the country makes sense. That is the Bundian Way.

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