The Canning Stock Route has a long and largely invisible place in the story of Aboriginal art in the Western Desert. Over the past decades it has emerged here and there, in a painting title by Rover Thomas or a painting story by Eubena Nampitjin, but it has never been a story that has explained anything, or been explained by anyone. The stock route's most prominent place in contemporary Australian art is perhaps as the thin white line in the monumental Ngurrara Canvas II (opposite), a colonial thread so overwhelmed by the bright abundance of Country that it effectively disappears from view. The National Museum of Australia's Canning Stock Route collection, perhaps surprisingly given its title, achieves a similar effect by using the stock route as the focus for a cross-cultural story that throws the surrounding desert world into relief.

The Canning Stock Route is many things. It is an 1850-kilometre chain of waters that operated for a few short decades as a moderately successful way to transport cattle through the desert. It is a line on a map that crosses the Countries of many desert peoples. It is also the zone in which cross-cultural contact, conflict and ultimately cooperation (or at least, coexistence) between Aboriginal people and outsiders occurred in the twentieth century. It is the road that many people followed out of their desert lives and into the fringes of something called Australia. And today the Country the stock route cut across is surrounded by the major artistic communities of the Western Desert (see p. xv). A hundred years after its creation, the Canning Stock Route still sits amid the great spaces between those art centres, from the Kimberley to the southern goldfields, from the west coast to the fringes of Central Australia: a story waiting to be told.

The paintings in this collection could be viewed on one level as a survey of contemporary Western Australian desert art. So why have they been brought together as part of the National Historical Collection? Most are not 'historical paintings' that deal directly with the history of the Canning Stock Route. Rather, embedded and enriched by an equally vast collection of oral history recorded by the artists and their families, these paintings illuminate the world the Canning Stock Route bisected. In the process that road, and the history of twentieth-century Australia that it ushered into the desert, have been recast through Aboriginal eyes: re-imagined through the concepts of Ngurrara (Country), walyja (family) and jukurpa (the Dreaming).

The road itself operated as a stock route for only a few decades, yet as the main colonial artery into the desert region it was a vector for cross-cultural encounter and remains a reference point for Aboriginal narratives in oral history and contemporary art. The Canning Stock Route, and the collection that takes its name, acts as a narrative lens through which it is possible to trace both the human movements and the subsequent artistic movements that have defined the
changing landscape of the Western Desert in the twentieth century. Although there is no category of Canning Stock Route art and no homogenous group of Canning Stock Route people, the road does provide a historical and geographical locus otherwise lacking in our understanding of an important group of Western Desert artists. The stock route story is therefore one that connects the people and the art of the region.

Walijja: family, art and history
The Canning Stock Route project began with the recognition that there were artists from each of the art centres surrounding the stock route who had historical and familial connections to it and adjacent Countries. It was well known that many of Western Australia’s most celebrated Indigenous artists, including Eubena Nampitjin, Nyuju Stumpy Brown, Billy Thomas, Donald Moko, Wimritji Tjapangarti, Spider Snell and Patrick Tjungurrayi, have direct historical connections to the Canning Stock Route. What could not have been anticipated, before people came together to share their stories throughout the life of the Canning Stock Route Project, was the extent of these family connections between seemingly unrelated artists from geographically diverse art centres (see diagram, p. 228).

Martumili artist Jakayu Biljabu was married to Warlayirti artist Eubena Nampitjin’s brother; Eubena herself helped ‘grow up’ — or raise — Yulparija artist Donald Moko and Martumili artist Nancy Chapman; Kayili artist Jackie Giles’s sister was Warlayirti artist Elizabeth Nyumi’s mother. And Papunya Tula artist Charlie Wallabi was somehow closely related to everyone. The depth and density of these relations across the artistic compass of the Western Desert is somewhat disorienting for those used to thinking in geographic terms of ‘Balgo’ or ‘Bidyadanga’ artists. What these relationships that cut across art centres highlight today is the history of those twentieth-century movements, both along the stock route and away from it, that separated people from their country and from their families.

Among the most striking examples of someone who exemplifies the relationship between social and artistic dispersal around the Canning Stock Route is a man who is not regarded as a Western Desert artist at all. Rover Thomas was born at Yalta, a soak just north of Kunawaritji (Well 33), and grew up around the Canning Stock Route in the 1930s. After the death of his parents, Rover met up with drovers travelling back along the stock route and followed them north into an improbable future in which he became one of Australia’s greatest artists. In his wake other waves of contemporary Aboriginal art, less obvious and less commonly understood, fanned out across the desert (see map above). As Rover moved north, his sister Nyuju Stumpy Brown followed, travelling first to Balgo and later Fitzroy Crossing. Rover’s other sister, Kupi, gave birth to Mary Menibida, who left the desert in one of the westward migrations that took people to Bidyadanga.

(Left) Map showing the different directions Rover Thomas and his family travelled as they moved away from the Canning Stock Route country, and the places where they settled
(Left) Sisters-in-law Jakayu Biljabu and Eubena (Yupinyu) Nampitjin embrace on the Canning Stock Route at Well 36 photograph by Tim Acker, 2007
Rover's older brother, Charlie Brooks, moved south to Jigalong, where his son, Clifford Brooks, was born.

Rover's extraordinary trajectory represented the rule not the exception. Just as his siblings dispersed to Balgo, Bidyadanga and Jigalong, a similar scattering was also the fate of many of the families whose lives intersected the Canning Stock Route. Kin moving at different times, and for different reasons. Out of their home Country found themselves settled on missions and stations at vast distances from one another. It was in these small communities that painting flourished in many localised forms, and so in one small family group such as Rover's, we can find artists from four geographically and stylistically diverse schools of contemporary desert art.

When we find Bidyadanga artist Donald Moko painting Rover Thomas's birthplace Yalta (p. 119), or Papunya Tula artist Richard Yuenbarri painting Kayilli artist Norma Giles's birthplace Kalyuyanglu (p. 164), it becomes clear that the identities of contemporary artists are constituted as much by relationships across art centres as they are by those within them. That Jan Billycan (pp. 114-16), who lives in Bidyadanga, and Nada Rawllins (p. 117), who lives in Wangkatjungka, are painting the same place, Kriviiri, shows how greatly the paths followed by people from the same Country had diverged.

There is perhaps no greater embodiment of the family connections underpinning the story of contemporary desert art than the men's collaborative painting, Kunawarritji to Wajaparni, that was produced at Kilykily (Well 36) in 2007 as part of the 'return to Country' trip. The work was painted by eight men (Patrick Tjungurrayi, Jeffrey James, Helicopter Tjungurrayi, Charlie Wallabi, Clifford Brooks, Richard Yuenbarri, Peter Tinker and Putuparri Tom Lawford), representing five different desert art centres. The painting makes no reference to the line of the stock route at all. Rather the artists took a cross-section of the Country intersected by wells 33-38 and used it to explain the vast relational logic of their social world.

All this waters from that line to this line are all our family trees where our mob used to go from one waterhole to another, all as one people. This is our family tree this painting ...

Yeah, some mob came from here, some from there, all met up along these wells, jilas, before wells. People from the north, south, east and west all came together.

Jeffrey James, Well 36, 2007

The painting is made up almost entirely of different shades of white, but the variations in dotting technique reveal the hands of separate artists and the distinctive styles of different art centres. These artists meet around the wells, as their ancestors once did, to share a common story for that Country. It is revealing that such a small part of the stock route Country should have been painted by men from five art centres spread across the Western Desert. The diagram on page 228 provides another perspective on the
notion of the desert ‘family tree’ expressed in this painting. It shows in greater detail the relationships that underpin the story of contemporary desert art.

To see family members painting the same Country in very different styles, or indeed to see people from the same art centre painting different Country in the same style, is to begin to piece together the history of contemporary desert painting. Of course, not every artist paints Country along the stock route: some belong to Country further east or west. Not everyone followed the stock route to their current communities, or even encountered drovers; indeed, many intentionally avoided the route. But all of the artists represented in the collection consider themselves part of the story of this Country, a story that, while often organised around the Canning Stock Route, ultimately surrounds, absorbs and overwhelms it.

The Canning Stock Route story helps to contextualise desert painting in time as well as space. While this story allows us to make sense of the geographical and familial relations across contemporary desert art, it also helps us to reframe that art in terms of a much longer art history.

Acrylic paintings and other contemporary mediums are but the latest expression of a century of cross-cultural communication mediated through the visual languages of the desert. When Alfred Canning was carving his commercial channel through the desert it was, while often a matter of coercion, nevertheless a process of aesthetic translation. Canning would sometimes ask the Aboriginal men to draw, in the sand, a diagram of the waters to be found north or east of their current location.

You would know the native name of two of the waters behind you. You would draw them on the ground and clear a fairly large space on the sand, and then the natives would draw other waters at proportionate distances to those wells you put down, and get them to point to them with their hunting spear, and I would take the bearings. After we had taken the bearings I would know about the direction I wanted to go ... That is how the natives were so extremely useful to us.

And as soon as the bearings were secured, using a spear point as ‘compass’, doubtless these sand drawings were casually effaced by Canning’s boot or a guide’s hand.

Canning did sometimes endeavour to create more lasting records: ‘I gave Tom, one of the guides, a lead pencil to try and draw a map himself, and then he could put it through his nose as an ornament’. While Tom was not inclined to use the pencil for either purpose, he used his skill at sand drawing to other creative ends; when the drawing was finished, and Canning was distracted, Tom seized his chance to escape. This sand drawing, like the many others Canning used to survey the stock route, was erased. These are the missing maps.

Canning failed to collect more lasting records of the Aboriginal perspective on the desert.

I know that kartiya fella [white man] been putting all the road. Still, I reckon, only lately. That road been put by that Canning mob lately. But we trust this bloke [our Dreamtime ancestor]. Dreamtime, that’s really true. Before, used to be blackfella country.

Ngurrinja Tonmy May, Nyama (Lake Stretch), 2007
Instead, we have his map (p. 34), which, despite its austere beauty, tells us nothing of the Indigenous world it cut through. Maps encode the perspective, the ideologies and the values of the people who make them. Canning's map reveals only the bare details of feed and water to either side of the narrow corridor he was employed to survey. On either side of this channel, the country is seemingly empty, without value to the settler imagination.

In 2008 a senior Martu man, Billy Patch (Mr P), sought to explain the deficiencies of Canning's map, and modern tourist maps, by creating an alternative map (opposite) of the desert Country the stock route bisected. He began by laying a network of horizontal and vertical lines through the sand. The intersecting points on the grid marked different Ngura, camps or water sources, while the lines connecting them denote the songs that are sung for these sites and the journeys people took between them. It was a grid symbolising the cultural topography of the desert. Then, over the top of that he drew a thin line curling between two points, Wiluna and Billiluna. That line, the Canning Stock Route, cuts through a pre-existing network of cultural and political boundaries, songlines and laws which were invisible to the early explorers (see also the Dreaming tracks map on p. 18, which expresses a kindred Aboriginal perspective).

Miinypuru (Seven Sisters), by the late Muni Rita Simpson, Rosie Williams and Dulcie Gibbs, appears to be a complete inversion of Canning's map. While the stock route is present, as a red ribbon cutting through the artists' Country, it is surrounded by the waters and Dreaming sites of the Miinypuru. Where Canning's line representing the stock route was intricately detailed and the Country either side of it was blank, here the perspective is reversed. The women's painting has the stock route as a negative red space through the centre of the painting, surrounded on all sides by the abundance of Country and the authority of another, much older story: one in which the incursions of twentieth-century history, however radically disruptive they may have been to the material conditions of people's lives, remain merely as scratches on the surface.

Right. This story about Dreamtime. Dreamtime people before Canning. Before whitefella come with a camel Dreamtime people were there.


Miinypuru was painted on the stock route in 2007, during the 'return to Country’ trip. At the end of that trip, Mangkaja artist Ngarralja Tommy May drove down to the final camp from Fitzroy Crossing; he brought with him a painting he had recently completed, Kurlal and Karingarra (p. 134). It depicted two of the ancestral jila men, whose journeys are inscribed in the Country around the northern end of the stock route. On the banks of Nyarri (Lake Stretch), Ngarralja laid the painting down and proceeded to explain what it meant.
That Canning Stock Road they been only put them lately. It wasn't Canning Stock Road before. Before, it was these two men [Kurlat and Kaniyanka], Dreamtime story. Before, it was blackfellas Country.


Ngarralja explicitly places the story of the stock route within the context of a deeper history and a longer story: the Dreaming or Jukurrpa. This autonomy and authority of the Jukurrpa in relationship to the whitefella road is expressed in different ways by artists throughout the collection. Patrick Tjungurrayi (p. 168) sets the historical line of the Canning Stock Route against the tracks of the Tingari Jukurrpa, which dominates the Country east of the stock route. Cast in this mythic shadow, the stock route wells become absorbed into the Tingari iconography of concentric squares. Whereas in Minypuru the stock route is surrounded by the Jukurrpa, here it is reclaimed by it, and reinterpreted through it.

Another painting that re-integrates the stock route into the Country it passed through is Kumpaya Girgaba's Kaninjaku (p. 42). The name 'Kaninjaku' is Kumpaya's desert-inflected translation of 'Canning Stock Route' but, among the undulating sandhills running west to east in this painting, the road itself is barely perceptible. At best, it is a topographic kink in the colour around Kunawarritji. The road has been absorbed into the artist's voice and vision of her Country.

The stock route is used as a cross-cultural reference point, visually and verbally, in several important works in the collection, but in many more it remains unnamed, invisible as either a landmark or narrative. Although collaborative paintings such as Kunkun (p. 50) cover vast tracts of desert, most artists paint the relatively small areas of Country with which they are intimately associated: their waters, and the small section of a song or Jukurrpa narrative for which they are custodians. Male artists such as Wimmitji Tjapanangari (p. 166), Brandy Tjungurrayi (p. 161) and Charlie Wallabi (p. 160) paint sections of the Tingari Jukurrpa for which they have authority, and likewise many women paint different sections of the Seven Sisters Jukurrpa. These paintings reveal the links, made manifest through shared Jukurrpa narratives, between sites and people across the desert. Stories of the jila men help us understand the social and environmental essence of the jila Country in the Great Sandy Desert. Paintings by Spider Snell, David Downs and Jakayu Biljabu reveal the extent to which these areas of the desert, and the people who paint them, are linked together by epic narratives. It is through attending to these paintings, and to the relationships between them, that we can better understand the desert world the stock route cuts across.

While the collection as a whole presents a vast political tapestry of Dreamings, desert sites and boundaries that were interrupted by the currents of twentieth-century history, individual paintings return us to the often overlooked intimacy of desert art. Pukarliyi
Milly Kelly's tiny brown painting, Puntawarni, rough and rusted, has a little yellow space in the corner. This was Milly's home, the shelter she lived in as a girl with her family. jewess James contributed a painting that is no less affecting (p. 130); Kulyai shows her family camping long ago, their fires burning between them as they sleep. It was such homes as these that colonial history interrupted.

History in art

None of the artists painting today were alive between 1906 and 1910, the period during which Canning surveyed the stock route or first sank the wells. Despite the fact that the existence of the road predates the births of all the artists in the collection, in the Aboriginal worldview of the desert country the stock route happened 'only yesterday'. Many desert painters who were born in the height of the draying era (1930s-50s) first experienced their Country as something that included the Canning Stock Route and the beings that it conveyed seasonally through their world. They were therefore as familiar with the stock route wells and their associated tales as they were with their rock holes and Dreaming stories. Several paintings in the collection therefore address specific historical events on and around the stock route.

Many accounts of early cross-cultural encounter around the stock route — seeing white people and strange animals, or trying the new foods they brought with them — are told with great humour. But, just as often, these initial experiences of contact involved conflict. Some paintings in the collection, such as Mayapu Elsie Thomas's Natawaru (p. 74), address specific conflicts remembered by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Other artists, such as Daisy Andrews (p. 75) and Dadda Samson (pp. 76, 77), recall horrific events that have never featured in the official catalogue of historical 'facts'. Other paintings are catalogues unto themselves. Patrick Tjungurrayi accompanied his work (above) with a series of oral histories recorded during the project and the process of painting. Tjungurrayi painted the stock route waters between Well 33 and Billiluna station in the north, narrating the unwritten history of those sites. At Lipuru (Well 37), he noted the murder of a white man by members of his family, while between Tiri (Well 41) and Kulyai (Well 42), he painted the site where white men massacred a desert family.

Bones are still there where they killed people ... I will show you.

Patrick Olodoodi (Alatuni) Tjungurrayi, Kiwirrkura, 2007

Tjungurrayi also recalls other killings at Jintijinti and Jikarn (wells 45 and 50), where Aboriginal people fell victim in various ways to the stock route and the troubled history that coursed along its path.

This is their Country. And they all died, whole lot. They got matches and chained them, made them sit down and put them in the
fire. They fired the people, you know. Jikarn people. Those [white] people were bad. They killed the people from this Country. there's nobody left from Jikarn.

Patrick Olodoodi (Alaluli) Tjungurrayi, Jikarn, 2007

These conflicts, like so many on Australia's frontier, are missing from the annals of history because they were not written down. But they were not forgotten.

We wanna tell you tellas 'bout things been happening in the past that hasn't been recorded, what old people had in their head. No pencil and paper. The white man history has been told and it's today in the book. But our history is not there properly. We've got to tell'em through our paintings.
Clifford Brooks, Wiluna, 2006

Clifford Brooks is an artist for whom painting is an intentional act of historical redress. His painting Blood on the Ground (p. 100) outlines events surrounding Clifford's father's search for his brother, Rover Thomas, and the subsequent discovery of a massacre.

He been get up on a sandhill and he been look down ... whiteman massacre. They been get shot: men, women and children.
Clifford Brooks, Wiluna, 2006

This massacre may be the same one recorded by Patrick Tjungurrayi, but it is nowhere recorded in official histories. In Brooks's painting the massacre sits outside the stock route and outside mainstream history, like much Aboriginal history itself.

These explicit acts of redress in contemporary artistic practice are not confined to histories of frontier violence and conflict. Mervyn Street's record of indigenous drovers working cattle on the stock route (see p. 150) counterbalances the usual valorisation of white drovers such as Wally Dowling.

Lotta old people telling me 'bout they used to drove from Billilama straight across to Wiluna. But they're not in the photos, they got no name. Nothing. They gotta be part of this droving story.
Mervyn Street, Jilakurr (Well 17), 2007

This retelling of history is nothing new in Aboriginal art. East Kimberley artists such as Paddy Bedford, and indeed Rover Thomas himself, have a long tradition of painting historical narratives, station stories and massacres. Most indigenous artistic traditions and massacres. Most indigenous artistic traditions and massacres.

Well, people felt empty when he was gone. They can't come back. They moved away.
Animals moved away. People, animals, they're connected. When they took that snake out, they made that place out of balance.

Lloyd Kwilla, Wangkatjungka, 2009
they happen here or there, in the places — Ngurra, or Country — that people paint.

At NATAWALU an aboriginal man speared a kuriya, then that kuriya got a rifle and shot him. Right [at] NATAWALU. That’s the place I painted now.

Mayupu Elise Thomas, Ngumpan, 2008

In this place-based view of the world, stories from the Jukurrpa, from family, from colonial history and from personal experience, are all layered in the sites where they happened. Country is a kind of memory. NATAWALU, in the paintings of the Canning Stock Route collection, is not just the site of the first conflict on the stock route, but also the place where there occurred a cross-cultural encounter laced with humour and goodwill: the rescue of Helicopter Tjungarrayi (see pp. 154-69). It is where desert families and ancestral beings rested on their travels, and the place from which many artists began their own epic journeys out of their traditional way of life. NATAWALU has been overlaid with new narratives for more than 100 years, but it was long ago inscribed with stories and meanings that ‘history’, in the form of the stock route, came to intersect.

Nowhere was the intersection of worlds more dramatic than at Kulyayi (p. 130). Kulyayi was one of the ancestral jila men who had become a rainbow serpent, inhabiting the water that would become Well 42 on the stock route. According to the artist Jewess James, white men killed Kulyayi when they built or rebuilt the Canning Stock Route well over his water.

They killed that jila for that water Kulyayi. They found him at his own waterhole and killed him.

Milkunjung Jewess James, Ngumpan, 2007

Kulyayi’s death marks the clash of history and the desert world. This death of an ancestral being might be taken as a metaphor for the collision of world views; but it is also very real. When the well was built, and the snake was killed, people’s relationship to Country was irrevocably changed.

The homes of desert people were organised around waters, which were created by ghaertal energies and around which the stories, sentiments and logic of desert life were forever woven. It was these waters that the stock route usurped, and these stories that it stumbled into. Lily Long’s painting, Tawa (p. 78), provides a final example of a place where personal, historical and ancestral threads entwined around the image of the ‘government well’. ‘This is the Canning Stock Route’, the artist begins, and we are invited to imagine ourselves with Lily as a child perched on the hill watching the incongruous marvel of the drovers and 500 head of bullock drinking at her family waterhole. Then as those memories shift to the horizon of hills that oversee the well, we realise these events occurred within a sacred landscape of much older narratives. One of those stories relates to the poisoning of the ancestral heroes, the Wati Kutjarra, by an ancestral woman. In a sad twist on the tale of this Country, Lily notes that her own uncle was in turn poisoned by drovers on the stock route. In one painting about one place, these threads of history, memory, art and Country have been interwoven. Stories of cross-cultural conflict on the Canning are prominent in people’s oral histories, and appear as themes in contemporary art, but they also remain layered within alternative world views that challenge us to consider the nature and impact of such conflict in the stories we tell about Australia.

What is a rainbow serpent if it can be killed by human action? What was the Canning Stock Route if its impact was, among so many other things, to kill Kulyayi? How is Australian history to be understood on these other terms? The paintings of the Canning Stock Route collection invite us to ask these questions.

Conclusion

The contemporary art of the Western Desert draws back the curtain of Alfred Canning’s map, revealing the bright desert world over which it was drawn. The paintings of the Canning Stock Route collection attest to the abundance of meanings that artists draw from and acrrible to their homelands; they re-map, or perhaps rather unmap the desert terrain to which Canning’s map laid claim. These paintings are not, individually, maps in a Western sense. But collectively they emerge as a kind of map: not a map for oriented oneself in the landscape, but for re-orienting oneself in history. It is in the relationships between works of art, between artists, between art and history, and between history and Jukurrpa that these paintings tell another story. To move among them, on the page or in an exhibition space, is to be pulled away from the line of the stock route and the history books back into the story of the Country.

The Canning Stock Route collection is not a summary of the past 100 years, but a vibrant assertion of the many thousands of years of cultural continuity in the light of which our shared history needs to be understood. In the end, the stock route is little more than a line on a whitefeather map, but as a story it allows us to draw into focus the broader and less easily harnessed histories of many Aboriginal peoples. Like the road from which it draws its name, the Canning Stock Route collection is many things; and ultimately it is not really about that road at all, but rather about a far bigger and more important story that is only beginning to be told about Australia today.