

## Mapping the domain – Inside the Outback: Mapping the West

by EMMA WISE

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Emma Wise presented a slide-show and unscripted talk at the mapping the domain session on Friday October 5 at culture@com.unity. Reprinted here is an article about the Mapping the West project published in the August edition of ArtReach magazine.

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*Masses of bulrushes completely fill one channel of the Lachlan River near Oxley. An old wooden bridge lays a path across the reeds, no water in sight. I stop the car on the Western Division side of the river, clamber over a fence and spend half an hour taking photographs of the brown velvet heads in the afternoon light. According to the map, a place called Oxley should be around here somewhere and I want to check out the Oxley Lodge, a restaurant and possible performance venue, before dark.*

**Inside the Outback: Mapping the West** is a 'cultural map' of the Western Division offering a snapshot of life in the region today – a way into knowing this most isolated part of New South Wales. The project that created the map was part of an Australia Council initiative to raise the profile of the arts in rural Australia through alliances with rural organisations (in this case, WEST2000, the rural recovery program for western New South Wales).

*A few buildings hug the line of river trees on the edge of a vast plain. I stop to capture the place with a shot of a tiny weatherboard church against the straight horizon, but the sun is low and difficult and a snarling dog is coming closer. I slip back into the car and continue along the road looking for 'town'. There's a scattering of houses and then I catch sight of a long low Tudor-style building. It must be Oxley Lodge.*

The Western Division covers around 42 per cent of the state, everything west of a line that wriggles roughly southwest from the Queensland border at Mungindi down to Balranald and the Victorian border. The Western Division's population of just under 53,000 – roughly eighty per cent townspeople (around 21,000 live in Broken Hill) and 20 per cent rural people – is scattered across the region.

I moved to Cobar and spent the first few months of the project getting to know the region and working out how best to realise the map within budget constraints. (The cost of covering such a large area is huge. I calculated that, given an average speed of 100km/hr, by the end of the year I had spent the equivalent of 13.5 weeks driving solidly for 40 hours a week.)

*Several utes are parked round the back, no other sign of life. A door is open but it is so bright outside I can't see in. I step into the black hole and as my eyes adjust I make out a dimly lit room with a bar at the back and an almost perfect circle of a dozen men in singlets, tatts, hats and work shirts seated on a collection of ancient armchairs and stools, all staring at me in complete silence. No one speaks. Beers are frozen mid sip. All I can think is, 'I've got to get a photo of this', but where to begin?*

A cultural map can be almost anything – a collection of oral histories, a documentary film, a website, a book, a performance. Each 'maps' the culture of a particular place or people in a different way. My reference committee wanted something engaging as well as informative, which ruled out the thesis-style document of many cultural maps. We decided against a website (the region has relatively poor telecommunications facilities), a film was too expensive and a book would look too much like an annual report. We decided on a loose-leaf format so it wouldn't just sit on a shelf – it can be handed around classrooms, exhibited on walls and used as a promotional tool.

*I'm in linen and a straw hat, fresh from a meeting in Hay. I pull out a cheery smile and ask for the owner. Someone rallies to speak, sending me through a door into the deserted restaurant. I wait. I peer through swinging doors into the kitchen. I poke my head through and coo-ee. A large well-*

*rounded man in overalls and a T-shirt eventually emerges looking sheepish. I introduce myself and his face clears. I explain the project and say I'd love to take a photo of those blokes and he gives a big smile and says 'no worries'.*

Although a lot of the writing and photography in ***Inside the Outback*** is mine, I wanted the local people to become involved in mapping what is, after all, their place. Cath Fogarty (RADO, Outback Arts), Philippa O'Halloran (RADO Arts West of the Darling) and I organised writing workshops across the region. Participation was excellent in spite of the distances involved, and it was hard to choose from the many fabulous stories produced. Local people also contributed several photographs used in the 'map'.

***Inside the Outback*** comprises 68 loose-leaf pages of over 130 colour photographs and text gathered together in a box. It also includes a geographical map for locating the places written about and photographed. The text includes profiles of people and events in the region, the writing workshop pieces, and a selected cultural database.

*We go out and to my astonishment the man immediately introduces me as Emma, the new cop from Deniliquin, and any cautiously rebuilt conversation ceases. As I protest my innocence (being a cop is clearly not a good thing) he laughs and explains who I really am and they are all quite happy to have their photo taken. They tell me they are woodchoppers and I promise to come back in a few days and take shots of them at work.*

Given the size of the region, and the limited response to publicity early in the piece, I decided against organising focus groups across the division, taking instead an event-based approach to 'mapping'. ('Culture' for the purposes of this map is taken to mean all the activities and customs that constitute lifestyle and contribute to a sense of local identity.) I attended events, spoke at community group meetings and spent days taking photographs of anything and everything. I'd usually have the name of a 'mover and shaker' in each area; that person would give me another name and so it went.

*Later that night at a friend's property just out of Balranald I tell the story and they are very amused. They tell me that where those blokes are working is an hour or so away from the nearest pub, and that everyone knows there's a new female cop in Deniliquin and when I walked in they all thought they were sprung*

I left Cobar at the end of the year to finish off the project and see it through the printers in Sydney. A fabulous design by Ulla Korgaard and excellent colour reproductions have produced a gorgeous final product filled with surprises. My thanks to all the people involved in helping to create ***Inside the Outback: Mapping the West***.

***Inside the Outback: Mapping the West*** has been distributed to schools, libraries, shire councils, cultural institutions and many community groups. For further enquiries, please contact Regional Arts NSW. ■

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