

'River ... I Follow River.'

by

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A Letter from the River,
To anyone anywhere, who thinks about
canoes and rivers.

Let me begin by telling you a story. It is
the story of where I am and what I'm
feeling. This may seem of little
consequence to you, but it is important
that you let me tell it before I make you
an offer.

I'm sitting on top of an old wooden box,
a tucker box (it was a school desk in a
previous life until it underwent a
metamorphosis in my shed), beside a
morning campfire fire which is heating
the billy for my cup of tea. Before me a
large sweeping bend of the Murray
River, known simply as 'the River' to
those living close to it, is materialising
out of the heavy, dispersing eucalyptus
air. We're somewhere between the
Torrumbarry Weir and the twin
townships of Koondrook and Barham.
Impressionistic reflections of trees and
scattered light curl and spiral in the
water. To my right is upstream, where
we have come from. To my left is
downstream, where we are going.

Today we will be travelling again in the
canoes we started building several
months ago, but we don't know where
we will be camping. No destination
drives us forward. Behind me is a giant
sweep of redgum forest, which will soon
fill with the screeches of Sulphur
Crested Cockatoos. They will wake the
other members of the group.

But just know I'm sitting alone and
writing to you in my journal, a lovely
hardbound book of sketching paper that
I found in an art shop in Bendigo. The
act of writing makes me think more
clearly and the discipline of sketching
makes me observe, makes me 'see'.
But my journal is more than a
repository of thoughts, imaginings and
drawings. Occasionally I am stunned
by the independent mind it seems to
possess as it tells me things about
myself that I barely realize. Like
Katherine Mansfield my journal seems
to call out '*Come, my unseen, my
unknown, let us talk together.*'

A passage from one of my favourite
Tennyson poems is scribbled inside the
front cover, beneath a sketch of a

silhouetted canoeist. In it Ulysses addresses his mariners as they ready the sails to depart for the dark broad seas.

*Come, my friends,
Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows: for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.*

A stack of books, dirty with sand and their pages weathered through use, balance near my feet. On the River we have time for both writing and reading. My journal also keeps pace with my reading, quoting passages where my story and those of the writers cross paths, merge briefly, before going on their separate ways. Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize winning *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek* rests above Caroline Jones' *Search For Meaning*, Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines* and Paul Coehlo's *The Alchemist*. There is a small book off to the side which ... but I am distracted ...

... a Yellow Spoonbill flies overhead. It glides on motionless wings curved against a great weight of air, that I cannot feel. Mid-flight it cocks a leg and scratches behind its head with its black webbed foot and then prepares to beat its wings to fly out of sight above the redgums. It seeks another river bend this morning perhaps. It takes the incredible for granted. Just now I feel like that - relaxed, at ease - happy for a moment to let my thoughts drift on hidden currents that I cannot fully understand. The River has slowed me to

its pace and my thoughts begin to drift and eddy.

What characterises our journey? We are more a nomadic affiliation than a group - secondary school and university students, teachers, friends and relatives, even two dogs. But we have clustered, like moths to a lantern, around a common dream. We may have less choice in the matter than we think. We may be drawn to it like the Caribou Eskimo, who told Dr Rasmussen "*What can we do? We are born with the Great Unrest. Our Father taught us that life is one long journey...*" Kipling too, had a feel for it; "*All things considered there are only two kinds of men (sic) in this world - those that stay at home and those that do not.*"

Largely, the impetus has come from participants in the Melbourne Rudolph Steiner Outdoor Education program who conceived the idea for the trip when warming themselves around a mallee root campfire in Victoria's Sunset Country a year earlier. Also, the enthusiasm for traditional canoeing techniques and philosophy that I returned with after living in Canada has infected my friend Art Curl, Steiner's outdoor education teacher. But beginnings are often illusory and we could each reach back many years into our past to discover seemingly insignificant events which have led us here.

But our journey is more than ourselves. Our craft have become a defining element of our travels, our story. We have made them using fibreglass hulls we layered into a mold we found in a country backyard and then finished

them, and made the paddles, with Australian timbers and products wherever possible. It is the timber which gives the boats their unique and traditional feel. Alpine Ash, a creamy coloured, straight grained timber that bends well was used for the gunnels and the seats. A variety of beautiful decks, thwarts and paddles have been carved from Queensland Kauri, the deep blood tones of West Australian Karri, flesh pink Mountain Ash and beautiful dark, lustrous Blackwood.

We are indebted to grandfathers who stored tools and old timbers long ago, which we have now discovered and dusted off after years spent in the lost corners of sheds. How did they know that, one day, we would need them?

No two craft are the same. Each reflects the beauty of the timbers chosen and combined, and the inspiration of it's makers. The alternative would have been to use Malaysian rainforest timbers (sold throughout Australia under the generic label of Meranti), or paid a great deal more money for one of the mass produced, imported plastic boats on the market designed, it seems, with little feeling for the beauty of the craft or the aesthetic of the rivers and lakes they will end up floating across. Neither option appealed.

Incidentally, most timber suppliers sell Australian hardwoods under the label 'KDH' (kiln dried hardwood). This fails to give people a full sense of the connection between trees, ecology, and timber. For us, learning about the character of the different trees and the woods we used, and how to recognise them, was an integral part of the

experience. This time on the River is only part of a journey which began long ago, and has included sawdust and wooden shavings curling from the backs of spokeshaves. As the canoes begin to catch the morning sun where they float, tethered on a river that drains a full third of Australia, I am reminded of the trees and forests from whence they came.

We preferred to make our impact on the environment as close to home as possible so that we may have a realistic opportunity of mitigating it by making contributions back to the land. And now, through our boats, we feel further indebted to, and a part of, the Australian bush. Like Bill Mason, the famous Canadian canoeist, artist and film maker, ours are the most beautiful canoes ever made simply because they are ours. Their design has come from an ancient Indigenous heritage of ideas, and it was our hands that carved them into reality.

Our boats carry all of our needs. Fruit and vegetables, staples of flour, oats and beans are transformed into beautiful fruit pies, aromatic loaves of bread, porridge, chillies and various meals from our camp ovens and the white heat of a bed of redgum coals. We carry no stoves or fossil fuels to drive them, and there is virtually no packaging or waste as fresh supplies are bought from river towns along the way. Our actions have become defined by the boundaries and largesse of the River and its people.

We drink water straight from the River cold, or brew it with ceremonious style into large billies of tea. The sweat which beads on our brows during the

hot hours of the day is just water from the River that has taken a brief detour through our bodies as it continues its journey downstream. This detour sustains us on our journey.

Each meal affirms our community, a community which includes the River and the land around us. We dig out an old fireplace or set a fire on a sandy beach, gather an armload of fallen branches, collect a scoop of water from the River, relax, talk, wait, lean against our upturned boats, share brew and a meal. It is the simplest of things. It is timeless. We have, like Annie Dillard, *'cultivated a healthy poverty and simplicity, and with it bought ourselves a lifetime of days.'* A lifetime of days just like this one.

Yesterday we tied all of our craft together and drifted at river speed, which is wonderfully slow in a mechanistic world, for hours under the blue and white expanse of inland Australia's summer sky. At any given moment one of us may have been contemplating the microscopic life boiling in a single drop of river water clinging to the canoe's side, whilst another contemplated the sweeping view of the serpentine river from far above in a hot air thermal where a pair of white Sacred Ibis spiraled higher, higher.

When the haze of heat drove us from our thoughts we tipped ourselves from our canoes into the cool, brown river. Swimming away from the raft of canoes we suddenly saw it as a peopled island floating on a narrow stream of life, the River. We saw the crowding redgums line its banks, we saw the great dome of sky above become ribbed with high

cloud as a cool change began to grow out of the west, we heard the solar buzz of native bees collecting nectar from the flowering eucalypts, and we felt the inexorable progress of the water driving us from the mountains to the sea. We dissolved into the brown waters and became part of the River. Part of all it has ever known. Part of all it will ever know.

Climbing back into the canoes to dry in the sun I was like Norman Maclean, on whose novella Robert Redford based the film *A River Runs Through It*;

I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river.

We keep a rough idea of our whereabouts by referring to Maureen Wright's *River Murray Charts*. These beautiful hand drawn maps, full of sketches of old paddle steamers and animals, historical notes and river observations, tell their own unique story. Broken River Bend, Kate Malone Bend, reef, shoal, reach, bight, Barmah, Moira, the 263-mile tree; all of these and more have become woven into our vocabulary. How different it is to travel like this than to follow a topographic map, or a road atlas, which shows the River as only a thin blue line surrounded by a lattice of roads,

highways, settlements, grid lines and columns of cartographic details. The charts tell us that we are on an old river which has cut its path through history.

We have been away long enough for many of us to collectively read the same books. To share some of the same thoughts, handed from person to person. We have broken the barriers of shyness and reticence and discussed both worldly and personal things in the comforting warmth of the campfire, or the bluish afternoon cool of a shady river tree. We have even shed like a snake skin, our culture's embarrassment of emotion and recited those fragments of poetry which we can recall;

*And the bush has friends to
meet him, and their kindly
voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes
and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision
splendid of the sunlit plains
extended,
And at night the wondrous
glory of the everlasting stars.*

Banjo Patterson, *Clancy of the
Overflow*

Then, later on,

*They have cradled you in custom,
They have primed you with their
preaching,
They have soaked you in
convention through and through.
They have put you in a showcase,
You're a credit to their teaching,
But can't you hear the wild - it's
calling you.*

Robert W Service, *Call of the Wild*

Both these romantic verses have such easy rhythm and rhyme, and I have known them for so long, that they seem childish. But again, it is an illusion, for they have what all poets strive for yet only achieve in their moments of greatness, a deep and abiding sense of 'feeling'. It seems as if by an act of grace that they have managed to tame for a fleeting moment some wild thing. But, of course, it is a wild thing that comes from within.

Increasingly it is a sense of feeling gained, not one of knowledge, which makes our experience both worthwhile and meaningful. There are times when all that I have ever been returns to me in a moment of clarity. In the time it takes for a Spoonbill to complete a wing beat I have come full circle. I have been, gone and returned. I have drifted through all of my thoughts and arrived back at the point of my departure. I am left staring at the river with the smell of redgum smoke strong in my nostrils, and with the billy bubbling, suddenly noisily, beside me...

... and so I reach for that little book lying in the sand between the tuckerbox and the fire. It is Bill Neidjie's, *Story About Feeling*. Bill is of the Bunitj clan around Kakadu in Australia's north, and his are ancient words passed on from generation to generation. They may well have first been uttered 50,000 years ago, and now our stories cross paths and I extract, re-arrange and personalize some short sections into a journal entry which is part ancient, part contemporary; part Bill Neidjie, part myself. They tell of understanding the land as a feeling.

River...I follow river.

*Someone can't tell you. Story e
telling you yourself.*

*This story e can listen careful
and how you want to feel on your
feeling.*

*This story e coming through your
body,
e go right down foot and head,
fingernail and blood...
through the heart.
And when you sleep you might
dream something.*

*Your dream is real because your
spirit is true.*

*That spirit e watching us
For you and me that spirit.
Never lose. Always with us.
With you'n'me.*

*Feeling make you out there with
wind, open place
because e coming through your
body
because you like that.
Have a look while e blow, tree
and you feeling with your body
because tree just about like your
brother or father
and tree watching you.*

*Someone can't tell you.
Story e telling you yourself.
E tell you how you feel because
tree or earth
because you brought up with this
earth,
tree, eating, water.*

*Sky...
this cloud for us.
Your story, my story.*

River...I follow river.

Surely, there is a story in here for all Australians and it is here that we come to my offer. It is not a plea for you to become a 'green', whatever that misused and abused label has come to mean. For surely we would be condemned for raiding our forests by shallow conservationists who disown the timber industry and all of its activities and people as a totality. It is not a plea for you to reduce, recycle or re-use, commendable as these things may be in a crowded world. Nor is it a plea for you to sell your car, or trade your television, for a pair of walking boots and a backpack glitzed out in the latest colours and fabrics. So, what is it?

It is nothing more than an invitation for you to find a little time to join us on the River. We will finish this part of our journey for this year soon and will probably have to wait until next summer to return. But if our experience is to have been of any worth our journey will continue despite this. Unlike Ulysses we no longer want 'To follow knowledge like a sinking star, Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.' For we have lost a little faith in knowledge and prefer now to follow a feeling.

River ... I follow river.

The only tentative legitimacy we find is that it is a feeling that we all share. To be in the bush or on the River for a while, just for as long as it might take to begin to see things differently. To feel again the timelessness of sharing a meal, of breaking bread whilst sitting cross-legged in the sand around a bed

of cooling coals. To be both ancient and modern in the same moment. To feel again that strange osmosis when you become part land and the land becomes part you. To see again the Southern Cross slowly roll across the night sky, reminding you of what is transient and what is lasting. To share a moment with a soaring bird or a tree sucking hard at the River's edge.

For if we can learn from these simplest of lessons, if we can '*cultivate this healthy poverty*,' then perhaps we will pull on an old worn pair of boots, themselves full of stories of long journeys, and walk with them to the shops instead of climbing into the car to drive around the corner. Perhaps we will buy things and even grow things, like our grandparents use to do that will negate the calls for recycling which appear in part, at least, to be an excuse to keep living as we are. Perhaps we will feel once more those precious moments when we become absorbed into a place, and belong to it, like Bill Neidjie. And finally, perhaps, should we ever reach the sea on our River's journey (or any other place we feel is a destination) we might just discover that we have found a beginning at last.

Kind regards,
Brian Wattchow,
Grey's Mill Site, on the River.