From the Devils’ Marbles to Karlukarlu: the life and times of a sacred rock

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Between 1994 and 1997 I was employed as Regional Officer in the Alice Springs office of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA). This organisation is responsible for the protection of sacred sites and areas within the Northern Territory. In my time there, I was involved in a number of unusual issues related to sacred sites. By far the most satisfying was the issue of Flynn’s Grave.

In 1999 a large stone was removed from the top of Flynn’s Grave and was returned to its original and traditional home at Karlukarlu (Devils Marbles) near Tennant Creek. It was replaced by a stone of similar size and shape, obtained from the Alice Springs area under the guidance of local Arrernte custodians. The ceremony was well attended by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and has been rightly lauded as a major reconciliation event. Behind this event lay a long and interesting history.

The official history of the circumstances surrounding the repatriation of a sacred stone from the top of Flynn’s Grave, and its replacement, lies in secure files. The story I present here is a personal recollection, prepared some seven years after the return was agreed to. My recollections should not, therefore, be considered to necessarily reflect the views of the AAPA or of the other organisations and individuals involved in the event.

The Flynn’s Grave/ Karlukarlu story represents the conflict, confluence, and eventual conciliation between landscapes of two cultures: the historic landscape of white Australia and the sacred landscape of Aboriginal Australia. It was not the first time such a conflict occurred and it will not be the last. However, the story of the resolution of the issue is of interest to those involved in heritage management.

The Flynn’s Grave is also a story about converging landscapes. For most non-Indigenous Australians, the features of Central Australia that dominate are the natural history and the European social history, especially those ‘monuments’ that somehow manifest the ‘conquest of the outback’. Even the natural history may be considered a by-product of the process of colonisation, part of the transformation of the unknown into the known. For Aboriginal people, however, the landscape is one of sacred sites, of sacred country, of secular homelands and histories, and of social relationships. Everything that happens, happens in the shadow of the sacred. In these landscapes the monuments were, and still are, manifest long before Europeans arrived on the scene. In Central Australia the European landscape sits, literally, in the shadow of the Indigenous landscape. The historic sites and buildings of significance to most tourists are built on, beside, or under much older sites and landscapes of significance to local Arrernte people and their traditional affiliates. These landscapes are concurrent, converging, and often conflicting.

The memorial

The Reverend John Flynn is an Australian hero, revered as a Central Australian pioneer. Born in 1880, John Flynn was ordained into the Presbyterian Church in 1911. Greatly concerned over the welfare, both spiritual and physical, of the people in remote areas of central Australia, he was primarily responsible for the establishment of the Australian Inland Mission (A.I.M.) in 1912, becoming its Superintendent for the next 39 years. In the late 1920s he facilitated the introduction of the pedal radio to central Australian homesteads, greatly improving communications. In 1928, in an effort to improve delivery of medical aid to isolated stations, he established the A.I.M.’s Aerial Medical Services. This was to become the Flying Doctor Service in 1942. By the time of Flynn’s death in 1951, the lives of many central Australian people had been greatly transformed. Flynn’s legacy remains today in the form of numerous hospitals, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, and Australian Frontier Services, amongst other achievements.

In 1953, Flynn’s ashes were interred in a raised stone plinth at a site west of Alice Springs (in 1976 the ashes of Jean Flynn, his wife, were interred in the plinth). A large boulder was taken from the Devil’s Marbles, south of Tennant Creek, and placed on top of the grave. It is an impressive monument in both its simplicity and grandeur.

The monument has been a constant site of pilgrimage for visitors to Alice Springs. It is a long-standing element in the Alice Springs pioneer landscape. One component amongst others which include the pioneers’ graves in the cemeteries, the old Telegraph Station, the Residency, the Court House, the old Gaol, and the Ghan train line. These stand as testimony to the European conquest of Central Australia.

However, the hidden history of the monument is that the boulder that capped it originally formed part of Karlukarlu, a sacred site of great significance to the Warramungu and Kaytetye people and to their religious affiliates. Karlukarlu lies 400 km north of Alice Springs. At the time the rock was removed the traditional owners, the Warramungu and Kaytetye people, had no say in its removal, and few channels through which to describe its significance to white authorities. Similarly, the Arrernte people had no say in its relocation to within their traditional country. While the removal and relocation of the rock was clearly done without malice, unfortunately it was also done without knowledge of the significance of the rock and the wider site, nor of other social implications of such an action to Aboriginal people.

The consequences to the Aboriginal custodians were considerable and complex. Not only was a sacred site desecrated but, according to Aboriginal law, the custodians were also held accountable for failing to prevent its removal. Similarly, the action had an impact on the Arrernte custodians of Alice Springs. It is a breach of Aboriginal law to have the sacred object of another group on your country without authorisation. It is also dangerous to have an item that has sacred power that is not under the control of appropriate custodians (kind of like having an atomic bomb in your backyard).

Thus, several groups of traditional custodians were to inadvertently suffer from the removal and relocation of the rock.
The Kaytetye, Warramungu, Arrernte and their ceremonial and social affiliates were all affected. For years, this distress was known only to the Aboriginal custodians. With no formal voice or authority their pleas went nowhere or were dismissed. It was only with the passage of the Land Rights Act in 1974 that representation became possible with the establishment of the Central Land Council (CLC). By the early 1980s, the Land Council was representing Tennant Creek traditional owners in their pursuit of the return of the rock.

I have great respect for the work of the Land Council, and have worked for it myself. It has fought tirelessly for the recognition of Aboriginal rights. Its staff is dedicated. However, one criticism I have is that there has, in the past, sometimes been a reliance on rhetoric to carry arguments or support requests at the day-to-day, on-the-ground, level. This reliance on passion and dogma over process often allowed opportunities to be subverted. My recollections of records and discussions describing the pre-1997 history of negotiations towards the repatriation of the rock is that in the early 1980s, following meetings at Tennant Creek, the return was agreed to (or near enough to), by the non-Indigenous stakeholders. However, negotiations appear to have simply stopped because it was believed the non-Indigenous parties, while agreeing, were 'not sincere' enough. Discussions seem to have collapsed. Similar discussions in later years were similarly inconclusive. With the continued breakdown in negotiations, the issue was left to fester. It was a topic of conversation amongst local cultural heritage professionals but no more happened on an official level.

I began work with the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority in 1994. The Authority is a Northern Territory Government statutory authority – established in response to the Federal Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1974. As a Northern Territory Government Authority, it frequently attracted the animosity of the Land Council, being automatically considered a political tool of the incumbent 'right wing' Territory government. At the time, there was a review of Federal heritage protection legislation in progress and the Land Council was attempting to show that the Northern Territory legislation was failing in the protection of sites. As Regional Officer, I was approached several times by officers of the Land Council with the request/demand that AAPA become involved in particular complex and long-standing site protection issues. The AAPA was placed in a delicate position. Although I am sure that resolution of the issue was the primary intention, a failure by AAPA to achieve resolution would not be unacceptable to the Land Council. At the time I suspected this was part of the motivation behind the timing of the approach by the Land Council that AAPA become involved in the long-standing issue of the stone on Flynn's Grave.

As a result of this approach, the various groups involved were invited to a meeting to discuss the issue. At the first meeting were representatives of the local Arrernte community, the AAPA, the Central Land Council, the Northern Territory Conservation Commission, the Uniting Church, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and Fred McKay, Flynn's student, associate, and successor, who built the memorial.

The scene was set for potential conflict. I was terrified (perhaps slightly paranoid). So, before the commencement of discussions at the first meeting a few ground rules were established. These included that (a) this was not to be a blamestorming session: the removal of the rock was done without being aware of its significance, (b) The memory of John Flynn was in no way to be belittled, and (c) the meeting was to focus upon resolution of the request rather than the history of the issue. All participants accepted these conditions and the discussions proceeded.

It needs to be stated there was no legal avenue to compel the return of the rock, nor was there a legal requirement to consult as widely as was done. The legal owner of the site was the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory (CCNT). Prosecution for site damage was neither possible, warranted, nor desired. All that was required was the approval of the CCNT and the transfer could go ahead. However the Aboriginal custodians and communities, the CLC and the CCNT all appreciated that there was a moral obligation to consult with other organisations for which Flynn was particularly important.

To make matters even more interesting, both the CCNT and the CLC had competing interests in certain parcels of land. The issue of the rock could easily have been used by either party as leverage on the other with regard to those parcels of land.

So, prepared for the worst, the groups were bought together. A surprise was in store for me. The meetings proceeded amicably from the outset, without political grandstanding and devoid of reference to other agendas. All meetings were characterised by honest efforts to engage with the issue. In a surprisingly short time, all parties agreed that the return of the rock could and should proceed. The Arrernte custodians of Alice Springs, out of respect for Flynn and his successors and in acknowledgment of the sincere efforts of the participants, even offered to replace the existing stone with one from their own country. Agreement by other parties to the return of the stone was not, however, conditional upon this offer.

While the consultations were in train, and some time afterwards, the story of the proposed return eventually became known to outside interest groups and then public knowledge.

![Figure 1 Flynn's Grave, with the new boulder placed above it. (M. Fusco)](image)
There were some that were distressed by the proposal and newspapers were marked by letters and articles in which the preservation of the site was demanded. Informal messages were also received that ‘the Prime Minister was watching closely’. In fact there was to be no formal Federal or Territory political involvement in the case (as a cynic I feel this was because it was seen by politicians as too much of a hot potato more than anything else). Interestingly, terms such as the grave being a ‘sacred site’ to non-Indigenous Australians were frequently used by correspondents who failed to see the incongruity of their use of the term ‘sacred sites’ with regard to the significance of such sites in the world of Aboriginal people.

Shortly after the return had been agreed to, I left the AAPA. Some two years later the stone was returned and replaced with one from local Arrernte country.

Discussion

There are those who still persist in the argument that the return of the rock was an act of sacrilege – to an Australian Hero and an ‘Australian sacred site’. Looked at closely however there was little real furore – a few grumbles in the letters column of the tabloids and that’s about it. The slightly modified site quickly gained acceptance. It is likely that very few visitors to the site know that any such event took place.

What were the outcomes of this event? There are many. In terms of explicit outcomes, the custodians of Karlukarlu got their sacred stone returned, and with it, one long-standing wound in the community’s social and cultural skin could start to heal. The integrity of Karlukarlu was partially repaired. The Arrernte had a spiritually dangerous item removed from their country. Further, the Arrernte now have a strengthened element of involvement, with the incorporation of an element of their sacred landscape into the fabric of the site. Slightly closer relationships were forged between organisations. The memory of Flynn of the Inland was preserved.

There are also implicit outcomes. Regardless of eventual outcomes, the simple meeting of the groups involved was an implicit acknowledgment that the custodians had a right to present their concerns, have their concerns considered, and a right to be consulted. There was also the acknowledgment by custodians of the right of non-Indigenous people to characterise certain places as significant in their own cultural landscapes. There was never any suggestion that anyone should in any way feel guilty for the erection of such a monument, or that such a man-made monument was in any way inferior to the sacred ancestor-created ‘monuments’ of significance in the Aboriginal landscape.

In terms of the grave itself, it has never been a static site. It was constructed some years after the death of Flynn. Twenty years later, the remains of his wife were included. It has become a reserve. The road that passes it is paved, and urban development encroaches. The site is part of dynamic cultural landscapes, defined and redefined over time. All that has happened is that further chapters have been added to both the history of Flynn’s life and legacy and to the histories of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and cultural landscapes of Central Australia.

References
