

**Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon. *Talking Sideways: Stories and Conversations from Finnis Springs*. St Lucia: UQP, 2019. 290pp.
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Talking Sideways was composed from conversations which unfolded over several years between Abruinna elder Reg Dodd, and artist and writer Malcolm McKinnon, on Dodd's ancestral land on Lake Eyre in South Australia. Told episodically in alternating voices, it is about this land, Finnis Springs, and its complex, turbulent history. Familiar episodes of white incursions into Aboriginal country—explorers, anthropologists, missionaries, pastoralists, miners, land battles, grog and associated violence—entwine with exceptions and twists particular to this place and its people. Most notable among these exceptions are Dodd's grandparents, his Abruinna grandmother Nora Beralda, 'a proper tribal woman,' and Scottish pastoralist grandfather, Francis Dunbar Warren, who went to Finnis Springs in 1918. Their long and strong marriage created there for a time a rare and respectful exchange between the traditional owners and newcomers to this land. It is also an intricate mapping of this land by a traditional owner versed in its character and law, and a whitefella seduced by its beauty and its ways which have drawn him back for three decades.

Educated in the skills and knowledge of both grandparents, Dodd grew up in the saddle working on his grandfather's cattle station; learnt reading, writing and carpentry at the local mission school; and on weekends went bush with the women who taught him Abruinna lore on country. This broad education cultivated confidence, independence and the ability to earn money. When Francis Warren died in 1958 this nurturing environment began to fall apart. Without his strong leadership, family rivalries over rightful ownership of the property surfaced and the station suffered. A series of legislative changes from the 1960s, including the right to buy alcohol and be paid equal wages, exacerbated the troubles. These are among the examples Dodd gives of the way 'government legislation designed to make a positive change actually had a lot of negative effects' (100). Many pastoralists refused to pay equal wages and relocated traditional owners from their land into towns, so they gained rights but lost access to their country. The situation was further enflamed by dealings over the property's pastoral lease and the arrival of mining corporations. One of the book's many strengths is its detailed saga of mining battles and the town at their centre, Marree.

McKinnon tells the story of South Australia's 'El Dorado': the nearby Olympic Dam mine on Roxby Downs, one of the biggest ore bodies in the world, which first drew him to Finnis Springs in 1985. He travelled there to join activists determined to stop the mine and protect the water and unique desert oases with abundant plant and animal life known as the mound springs. Before the environmentalists arrived, the traditional owners had not understood the full impact the mine would have on their water. The original mining joint venture by Western Mining Corporation and British Petroleum sank bores at the edge of the Great Artesian Basin to provide the millions of litres of water the mine consumes each day, thereby threatening this most precious of all desert wealth. Dodd makes clear what should be obvious: 'Once you take the water away, these places just die. They're finished, and I don't think any amount of money can ever compensate us for that loss' (225). The authors vividly portray the complicated era of legal change (including the 1992 *Mabo* ruling and 1993 *Native Title Act*), rival claims, contested testimonies, manipulation, inter-family warring, money, grog and violence that ensued.

The ruthlessness, entitlement and rhetorical excesses of Western Mining Company are well captured by its former executive director, Hugh Morgan, in a speech made to the Australian Mining Council in 1984:

Just as Christian ceremonies such as blessing the fishing fleet or blessing the plough are well established both in Christian tradition and orthodox theology, so our ore bodies—and the equipment we use to mine them—are part of the divine order. (113)

But through these traumatic changes, Dodd and members of his family and community have worked ingeniously and tirelessly, if not always together, to claim their land and honour its traditional ways. Key to this has been Dodd's willingness to converse across cultural divides and engage with bureaucratic processes of successive governments and laws, and to enlist the support of lawyers, mining shareholders, environmental activists, tourists and other outsiders like McKinnon.

The friendship that shaped this book began in 1988 when McKinnon returned to Finnis Springs to escape the bicentennial celebrations and was welcomed there by Dodd. As part of his education in this country and in being white in a black community, McKinnon learnt 'to listen for the gaps and silences' (x). These gaps and silences are inherent in Aboriginal talking and knowledge sharing. As Dodd says at the outset: 'This is the way it is with us mob: we don't talk directly. The ones of my generation, we were brought up so that we talk kind of sideways, because that's the respectful way. That's the true Aboriginal way' (ix). This sideways talking and the incommensurability of Aboriginal and western knowledge systems create communication problems between black and white. This is especially evident in legal battles over land between mining companies and various Aboriginal claimants. The authors' nuanced elaborations of the disjunct between western and Aboriginal law and epistemologies in these long battles offer much-needed insights into the limitations of native title in terms of traditional ownership. They also vividly illustrate the ever-changing manifold nature of truth.

Another theme that recurs in various provocative ways is the double-edged sword that is money. Projects with financial ends are favoured over those with environmental and cultural purposes—and Dodd applauds the moment ATSIC cut their funding, because it forced them to fend for themselves. Money cannot make up for the loss of water and Dodd cannot put a price on the productive alliances they've formed with environmentalists, especially the first activists who helped them to understand the impacts the Olympic Dam mine would have on their water.

Talking Sideways is also an extension of Dodd's ongoing work to open cross-cultural conversations beyond Finnis Springs on behalf of his country and community, including through his tourism business. As he says:

For me, the main motivation has always been to teach people about our land and our culture, and to share some of that with people from outside. And there's been a great return from that work, in the sense that many people have developed an interest in and affection for our country, and they've wanted to do a lot of different, practical things to help us look after it. (210)

This is why these conversations, work such as Dodd's tourism and this book are so critical today: they begin to open a common ground on which Indigenous and non-Indigenous

Australians might talk through exchanging knowledge about our continent's many black countries and cultures. They also demonstrate the wealth of understanding Australia's traditional owners possess, which is critical for caring for these places. The need for this wisdom to be heard, respected and heeded is made ever more urgent by the many ongoing ecological catastrophes, including the exhaustion of the Murray-Darling River system, rampant bushfires and torrential flooding of the summer of 2018-2019.

Talking Sideways makes a fascinating, generous and important contribution to the burgeoning literature of place in Australia—and a persuasive appeal for help in the essential work of caring for country. Its riffing, circling voices are a testament to patience, tenacity, friendship, courage, love and the enduring bonds of country—as well as to the shifting nature of truth and the powers and perils of talking sideways.

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