

**Judith Parrott is an artist who divides her time between Australia and Scotland, using photography, video, sound and prose to explore the relationships between community, place and cultural identity, their effect on personal and environmental wellbeing and the consequent issues which can arise if these attachments are severed.**

By Jim Gilchrist

IAIN Crichton Smith's famous comment that "he who loses his language loses his world" comes to mind when talking with Judith Parrott. The Lewis poet and novelist was speaking about his native Gaelic, but the impact of cultural disenfranchisement is the same wherever it occurs and Parrott, a photographer, sound artist and writer with a particular interest in the importance of connection to place and cultural identity, has worked with Gaelic speaking communities in Scotland, but also with the Aboriginal people of Australia's Queensland and Northern Territory.

Parrott's work has taken her to the deserts of Australia's Northern Territory, to the Outer Hebrides, to Canada, Bolivia and Antarctica and, on one occasion, to incarceration in a jail in Alice Springs, of which more later.

Her landscape photographs, videos and soundscapes portray the arid rockscapes and unfamiliar birdsong of the Australian Outback or the green and grey waterworld of the Hebrides, but they also capture the speech, songs and other sounds of human habitation. As a Scot who has lived in Australia for more than two decades, she explores not just emigration but the displacement it creates – both for the emigrants and for the indigenous peoples displaced by incomers. These issues have informed much of her work, most recently in an exhibition, *Grounded*, which examines the traditional cultures of Gaelic speakers in the Outer Hebrides and Aboriginals of Australia's Central Desert and runs at Glasgow's Merchant City Festival as part of the 2014 cultural programme in association with the Commonwealth Games. Material from *Grounded* also features on the Struileag/Shore to Shore website.

These days Parrott divides her year between Brisbane in Australia and the Isle of Bute, and it is there, at her flat at Craigmore, overlooking the Firth of Clyde, that I meet her. Normally the window at which we sit commands a fine view across the water to the Cowal Peninsula; on this occasion, however, the prospect is curtailed by grey mist and soft rain. At one point the Waverley, the world's last sea-going paddle steamer, emerges from the mist to churn past, like an elegant ghost of bygone "doon-the-watter" days.

It is journeying of a rather different kind that we're discussing. Originally from Broughty Ferry, Parrott first arrived in Australia in the late-1980s on a back-packer's visa, with no intention of staying any great length of time. However circumstances, including the deaths of both her parents within a short time of each other, saw her staying in Australia. "So it's not as if I left Scotland deliberately," she says, "and I think that can be the reason why a lot of people settle somewhere in the first place, simply because circumstances evolve in a certain way."

She came to Bute in 2007 to take up an artist residency there, was invited back and has since made the island her Scottish base. For the 2009 Scottish Year of Homecoming, she embarked on a project documenting the sights and sounds of Rothesay on Bute along with Rothesay in New Brunswick, Canada. That project, as well as the recent *Grounded*, is part of an ongoing series, *Place Matters*, in which she works with communities across the globe.

Her interest in attachment to place – and what happens when that attachment is broken – has been developing since 2002, when her exhibition *West End – A Sense of Place* documented the rapid redevelopment of Brisbane’s inner city West End and its impact on the community there. “That was urban displacement. The suburb was being developed for luxury high-rise apartments and many people on low incomes were just forced out. It brought real distress to the community. I knew some of the consequences of displacement, so had an interest. I thought, ‘This isn’t right,’ and started thinking about what it was that makes connection to a place so important. I believe it is sensory, the things you see and hear and the textures and smells around the place. I think sensory input is very subconscious and powerful and if that internal connection is removed, it has its consequences.”

And in Australia there is perhaps no greater example of the effects of displacement than the cultural and social disenfranchisement of the Aboriginal people, with whom Parrott has worked increasingly over the past few years, since she was given the opportunity through Flying Arts Inc, an organisation which flies artists to regional Queensland to run arts workshops. She worked, for example, with the late Thancoupie, a primary Thanaquith Elder and ceramic artist, who ran bush camps for Aboriginal children to instil pride in their culture and language.

The infamous policy of “assimilation” – the forced removal of thousands of Aboriginal children by welfare officials – was officially sanctioned until the 1970s, while their languages and cultural practices were actively discouraged or banned. There were 250 different Aboriginal languages in Australia before colonisation, Parrott points out. Today, according to official statistics, only 20 are spoken by all generations so have any chance of survival.

The result, unsurprisingly, is disastrously eroded self-esteem. “When you’re told you can’t speak your language, you can’t have your cultural practises, there comes a feeling of shame.”

Parrott draws certain parallels with Gaelic, which was once actively discouraged in Scotland. In her Australian sound montages, one Aboriginal man tells her that he was lucky to be brought up “the white way, as this made it easier for him to fit in. So many Aboriginal people – custodians of the world’s oldest living culture – felt obliged to survive by forsaking that culture and adapting to the dominant white culture.

“My question,” asks Parrott, “is why can’t it be the other way about?”

Such catastrophic disenfranchisement manifests itself in terms of a high rate of alcohol and drug abuse and poor health – the average life expectancy for Aboriginal men in Central Australia is just 45 years. Some of those she interviewed had suffered from nervous breakdown or from drug or alcohol abuse. “Many of them,”

she says, “spoke of returning to culture and country as a way forward, finding pride in their skin and their culture through reconnecting with traditional ways such as hunting, painting and the Dreaming stories.

“Displacement affects personal wellbeing on a very obvious level for the Aboriginal people. It also affects, to some extent, the immigrants who have gone there. I think what is also really important is how it affects the environment. When people become disconnected from a place, they are bound to have less of a sense of responsibility for the land and find it a lot easier to damage the environment in a way they wouldn’t if they were still intrinsically connected to it.”

While she doesn’t like to generalise, she contrasts traditional Aboriginal use of the land with some of the officially sanctioned current damaging practices such as mining or the Queensland government’s expansion of ports along the coastline facing the Great Barrier Reef. “This sometimes feels like a very disconnected place, and the environmental damage is horrendous. The Aboriginal people did nothing to damage the Australian landscape.”

“In *Grounded*, I ask how we can learn from indigenous cultures rather than impose our ways on them, because I believe they have so much to tell us. Indigenous cultures don’t destroy the planet.”

Judith’s interest in the environment was further explored during a four-month residency with the Australian Antarctic Division which allowed her to stay and make field trips with personnel at the Casey, Mawson and Davis stations. It was, she says warmly, “an amazing place and a fascinating community”.

Back in Australia, however, a rather less liberating experience gave her an insight into Aboriginal life and the Northern Territory’s controversial Protective Custody laws which enable police to apprehend anyone deemed to be intoxicated and at risk of harming themselves or anyone else. Last September she and a friend were attending the annual Bush Bands Bash in Alice Springs, Central Australia’s main Indigenous music showcase. They had temporarily left the outdoor venue when they became distracted by cries of distress from some Aboriginal women who were being put in the back of a police van. The women, says Parrott, had had a drink but didn’t appear to be causing any problems and her companion asked the police, “perfectly quietly and respectfully”, where the women were being taken.

To cut a long story short, the police firstly banned Parrott’s companion from re-entering the music venue, then, when they returned to the venue after taking a walk, they arrested her companion. When a shocked Parrott questioned the arrest, she was promptly bundled into the van as well.

She spent seven hours in a police cell before being turfed out on to the streets of Alice Springs at 2:30 in the morning. She had to appear in court on the Monday, but in the event the police didn’t have the right paperwork and the case was dismissed. When, however, Parrott asked how she could complain about her treatment, she was advised by locals not to do so, the implication being that the authorities could make life difficult for her. “That’s the fear level there is there,” she says, “so I thought, ‘Well, I won’t complain, but I’ll put it in the exhibition.’ So it is, but it’s not about me

and my arrest, it's about what's happening to Aboriginal people in Alice Springs all the time."

As she points out in her *Grounded* blog, "over the past 20 years, incarceration rates across Australia have risen from one in seven people incarcerated being indigenous, to one in four. She doesn't blame the police so much as government policy: "It's the system that's allowing these things to happen and it is just totally open to abuse."

Other outback encounters, however, can be much more gratifying. In 2009 she was walking down the empty main street in Normanton, a small town in the Gulf Country, an area she describes in her blog as "a place of heat-glazed brittle land and far away blue", when an Aboriginal man fell into step beside her. Their conversation clinched her determination to mount the *Grounded* show.

Her blog takes up the tale "His name is Sidney and he is one of the traditional owners of the area, the Kukatj, Gkuthaarn and Kurtijar people. "Where are you from?" he asks. He stops in his tracks when I tell him I am from Scotland, a broad smile lighting his face. He wants to know if the story of *Braveheart* is true. 'We have so much in common with the Scottish people', he says. As we walk and talk, and I take his photo in the burning glow of the setting Australian sun, he asks me to do him a favour. 'Will you take this photo to Scotland and tell them I'm your brother?'"

*Grounded* runs from 23 July to 3 August, at 121/127 Saltmarket in Glasgow See <http://judithparrott.wordpress.com/about/> and <http://www.merchantcityfestival.com/Pages/Event-info.aspx?ev=1292>