

Great Fences of Australia by Jon Rose (Original notes to web page)

Many people look at fences and see not much; Jon Rose and Hollis Taylor look and see giant musical string instruments covering a continent. The strings are so long that they become the resonators as well as the triggers for the sound. On straight stretches of a simple five-wire fence, the sound travels down the wires for hundreds of meters. The music is ethereal and elemental, incorporating an extended harmonic series (the structure of all sound); the longer the wire, the more harmonics become available. The rhythms of violin bows and drum sticks uncover a fundamental sonic world. The fence music encapsulates the vastness of the place. Music of distance, boundaries and borders. This, however, is not the *songlines*, or even the white fella's ironic version of it, but the unexpected and elegiac music of the Australian landscape 'sounding' its recent history. Fence construction has inadvertently given us a means of expressing musically, with a direct physical connection, the whole range of intense emotion tied up with the ownership of the land, from the outback to the backyard.

The fence is the perfect metaphor for all kinds of manmade endeavours, disasters, contradictions and hubris. Fences arrived with the end of the hunter-gatherer way of life and the introduction of agriculture. With that came the development of the Abrahamic religions, the European philosophical tradition, the Cartesian mind-body split, an 'Enlightenment' that confirmed duality as 'can do'; the separation of mind and matter and the hierarchy of mind over matter. According to some philosophers, our present demise (or overwhelming global triumph!) is due to the domination of the grasping, language based left hemisphere of the brain over the holistic right hemisphere. Why do we have a divided brain anyway? We find ourselves now in a situation, maybe too late, where we are trying to reconnect with an animate planet full of beings, whether fauna or flora, that we have treated as 'not us' and trashed to the edge of extinction.

The invention of steel cable in the nineteenth century gave the fence its present distance-warping characteristics. It also gave us a technical tool with which to set about the enforcement of duality, and a separation from where we live, on a scale hitherto impossible.

Fences can be seen as analogies for the old binary battle between our species and nature, or our culture(s) and the wild. The desire for exploration, control, and exploitation of resources are fired by fences - indicating a frontier history of extreme hardship, violence, and getting.

They also mark the notion of belonging, friend or foe, certainty and uncertainty, knowing and unknowing. Fences mark the boundaries of cultures and political systems, the perceived civilised and the great unwashed, a sense of the private and public, a hierarchical statement that says "I exist" and the rest - eh - somewhere over there on the other side. In a few places, the fence today is even used to protect the natural world from our own excesses.

In Australia, fences are a very new addition to the environment. Certainly they were being erected within months of white settlement. While flying over the most isolated parts of the Australian interior, one notices the existence of fences often with their service tracks beside them. Why on earth are they there? Who put them there? How long did it take? Some fences seem so old that they often take on a mantle of defensive invincibility. But all fences are in fact transitory, finite. Even the longest fence in the world, the so-called dingo fence of Australia, will eventually succumb to nature and gravity despite the efforts of those who painstakingly and regularly repair it. The geography will survive the history.

Whatever your view of fences, they seem unstoppable, they are everywhere. Like all good mammals marking out their territory, western man defines his world with fences. Some land owners, however, still prefer the watering hole to the fence as a leash on their wandering cattle. And of course fence construction clearly interfered with, if not helped destroy, the Indigenous Australian's nomadic way of life.

Dr. John Pickard, Australia's leading fence-ologist, has estimated that by 1892 there were over 2.7 million kilometres of fences in New South Wales alone, which used up 20 million cut down trees with a worth of \$5.6 billion in today's money. He is still working on an estimation of total fencing kilometres for the entire country at the beginning of the new millennium. The numbers will be serious. Fences are by far the most visible artefacts that we have made on this continent. The Dingo fence is the longest man made thing on the planet, twice as long as the Great Wall of China.

Visually, Great Fences of Australia provides complex, critical, and humorous indicators of a culture which is often courageous, sometimes fearful, politically myopic, occasionally missing the plot, but strung together with cockeyed optimism.

Consider the ubiquitous corrugated iron fence in its various chronological shades of rust; the primary-coloured fences of the newly rich suburbs which possess all the subtlety of a Legoland layout; the brilliant white salt lakes which devour their fences within a few decades (significantly hard wood posts last much longer than steel wires); and the recently made desert fences of once optimistic pastoralists which often hang in mid-air after the top soil to which they were attached has been blown away.

A whole lexicon of signs are attached to fences, from the inevitable 'keep out' and 'danger' to the entrepreneurial 'pony poo, \$2 a bag'. There are fences that clearly don't work so well, hence the tons of deadly 1080 poison liberally spread down the km 5,309 of the 'Dingo Barrier Fence'. On the other hand, fences designed to stop enthusiastic tourists falling over the cliffs at The Great Australian Bight appear to have worked well--so far, anyway. Top secret military bases tell you to 'turn around NOW!' before you even reach their perimeter fences; signs across the Nullarbor warn of the dangerous 'unfenced road'; nothing short of an archaeological dig will let you uncover the remains of the Number 1 Rabbit Proof Fence at its termination point on the northern coast of Western Australia. People like to leave things on fences, like lamb skulls, beer bottles, shopping bags, flags, hub caps, condoms, flowers, ribbons, underpants, billy cans, etc. The pianist Norma Geddes remembers that in her childhood, after Dad had prepared the roo stew, she used the sinews from the kangaroo's tail to bow the fences around the homestead (clearly folks have been bowing fences in Australia for a while).

Some fences get to be multi-functional; they begin by trying to keep the bunnies out (always too late), then it's the dingoes, then it's the emus, then it's the 4WD tourists.

There are now plastic temporary fences, there are flexi-fences, fences you can see through, fences you can't see until it's too late. Graveyard fences are heavy, they keep the living from the dead or, depending on your point of view, the dead from the living. Railway lines, telegraph lines, pipelines and butterflies often travel down the same route as fences. Some fences just fall over and that's that. Sometimes they get a plaque on a wall if they were famous. There have been murders, suicides by fences. Early boundary riders working in extremely rough conditions on the Rabbit Proof fence were told initially to do it on a push bike! There's the story of an aeroplane flying right through a fence. It's true--people don't notice fences; but some people object to them; most Aboriginal people are opposed to them; asylum seekers agree. Barbed

wire fences never go out of fashion. And at Derby (Western Australia) in the 1930s, a fence kept those suffering from leprosy away from the hospital!

Fence posts without any wire look lonely.

It's difficult to imagine horses running around a race course without a fence. Like guitars, there are electric fences; one finds chain fences, rope fences, rubber tube fences, fences made out of sacking, fences made from hub caps and tyres. In Alice Springs there is a fence theme park. All swimming pools must have a fence by law. 'Beware of the dog' behind the fence. Is there anything that speaks more of a collapsing environment than an empty plastic bag caught up by the wind and left fluttering hopelessly on a barbed wire fence?

There are a whole range of user friendly plants that grow over fences; there are fences that go through termite mounds, a tree even; fences that actually pass through other fences; watch out for the fence with scare crow; don't miss the scary gothic fence; fences with fungi; new trees planted for civic pride get a fence around them for protection against the menacing public; the socially side-lined like to write on fences--sometimes it becomes official art; birds, like politicians, are comfortable sitting on the fence; camels like to rub their necks on fences; snails cannot keep away from fences; spiders find them great places to build webs; unrelieved men, if they cannot find a bush, will use a fence; AND where exactly does the Dingo Fence end in Queensland? We haven't found two locals who will agree on that. (Although now the tourist industry have decided on a spot for the sake of commerce).