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## Positioning the North: Making British Geographical Knowledge of Australia in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Johanna Skurnik

In this essay, I investigate the elusive place of northern Australia in settler colonial imagination and colonial governmental practices. Present-day Northern Territory, an area of roughly 1,349,129 square kilometres, was originally the land of numerous Indigenous Australian peoples.<sup>1</sup> Under British occupation and invasion it has since the nineteenth century undergone multiple different territorial designs and been the target of many colonization plans. The practices of governance and the diverse territorial ambitions portray ideas building on exploration knowledge, geographical deduction and the spatial organization of colonial governance. The focus of this essay are the years of transformation from the late 1850s to the early 1860s, during which the position of the north as a site for planned colonization was reconceptualized. Prior to the early 1860s the British made numerous attempts to establish settlements in the north, but these designs were consecutively abandoned.<sup>2</sup> The mid-century transformed the situation, at least in theory. As Dane Kennedy describes, this was the period for the “scramble for central and northern Australia,” an era when the Australian colonial governments sought to extend their spheres of influence and to redraw the intercolonial boundary lines.<sup>3</sup> During this time, the colonies grew rapidly in the wake of the gold rushes and in the 1850s the non-Aboriginal populations of all colonies doubled. People were arriving at the colonies from Britain with the introduction of quicker and safer passages.<sup>4</sup>

The British explorations on the northern coast and the several attempts and final successes in traversing the continent from south to north and back made the north tangible in a novel

manner. These included, among others, the North Australian Expedition led by Augustus C. Gregory in 1855-56 and the explorations by John McDouall Stuart around the turn of the 1860s. Gregory's expedition was the last major expedition funded by the British parliament and it was undertaken with high hopes regarding the geopolitical and economic opportunities that the north might offer.<sup>5</sup> Stuart conducted six expeditions between 1858 and 1862.

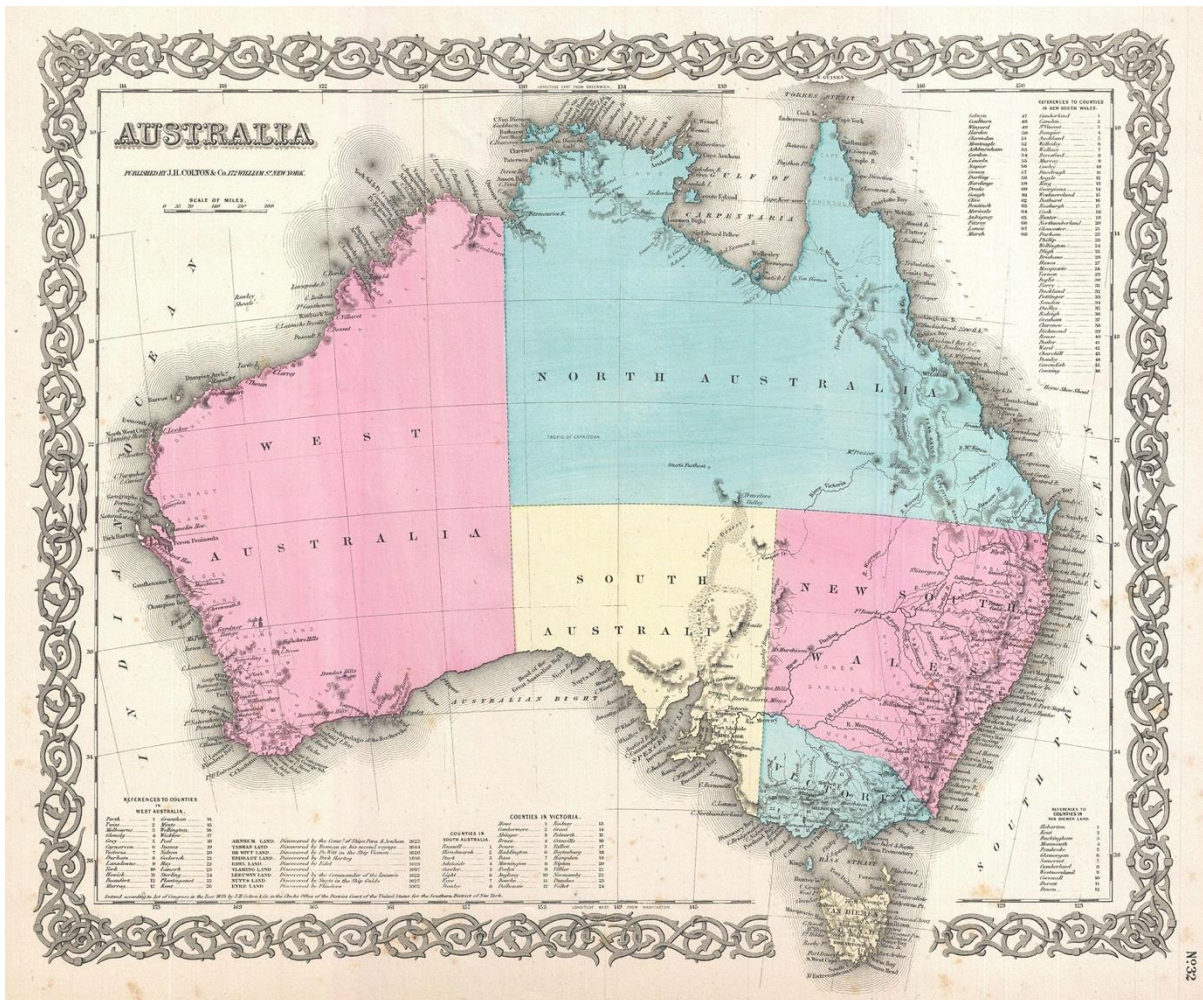
Sponsored by land speculators and later by the South Australian government, Stuart explored central and north Australia and finally succeeded in crossing the continent in 1862.<sup>6</sup> Executed in the wake of the granting of "responsible government" for most of the Australian colonies, the geopolitical rivalries between the colonies affected how government officials and the public interpreted their results.<sup>7</sup> The expeditions were part of a race that sought to expand settler colonialism to all sides of the continent, or as the contemporaries put it, to 'complete' the occupation of the continent.

This chapter revisits these historical processes of exploration and territorialisation to investigate the mobilities of geographical knowledge concerning the central and northern Australia and how different actors, especially civil servants, utilized it in their argumentation for the redrawing of the boundaries and the organization of effective colonial governance. An article printed in the Brisbane-based newspaper *The Courier* in 1861 aptly exemplifies the questions at stake. The newspaper printed the article after the government of Victoria had expressed interest to occupy a tract of land in the north. The colony based its claims on the discoveries made by the ill-fated explorers Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills. The Victorian government had sent them to cross the continent but they both had demised whilst returning from their transcontinental expedition.<sup>8</sup> *The Courier* noted:

It is manifestly absurd that a government [ie. Victoria] should demand the ownership and control of a territory separated from its own borders by country belonging to another state; yet such is the case in this instance, and it has occurred more than one in the history of Australian colonization. [...] As every one properly versed in Australian geography knows, the territory lying between the 26<sup>th</sup> parallel of south latitude and the northern coast, and the 129<sup>th</sup> and 141<sup>st</sup> meridians of longitude, literally belongs to no colonial government at present. [...] The claims preferred by the different colonies have, however, not been definitely decided upon by the home government, and the question therefore remains to be determined as to which province the coveted territory shall belong.<sup>9</sup>

These arguments put in circulation via the printing presses in Queensland underpin the focus of the present essay, namely the complex connections between land, geographical knowledge and territorialisation. They beg many questions: what was this “coveted territory” in the north? How did government officials, surveyors, explorers, and settlers know it to warrant it becoming the focus of heated geopolitical debate that generated piles and piles of letters and maps in different parts of the globe? Even though the area had been part of the mind map of many colonists in the south for decades, “northern Australia” was still in the 1850s and early 1860s a sparsely known area for the British. Furthermore, mapmakers territorialized it in many different ways, some labelling the north on their maps as “North Australia” as shown in Figure 1, although it was according to British legislation still part of New South Wales and such colonial territory no longer existed. Indeed, the British government had quickly abandoned the project of North Australia in the 1840s.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1: Map of Australia, 1855.** Mapmakers visualized the territorial divisions of Australia in varied ways in the 1850s. This map by American mapmaker Joseph H. Colton, published in 1855, helpfully shows the positions of the then existing colonies Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, and New South Wales. The map separates the majority of the north as “North Australia”, although this colonial territory no longer existed. In addition, the western boundary of South Australia extends too far to the west. Source: J. H. Colton, *Australia*, New York: 1855, Wikimedia Commons.



Knowing the Australian north was a collective process, resulting from combinations of empirical observations, intercultural knowledge exchanges, speculations and deductions in different locations. In this essay I discuss the geography of these processes: adapting from David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers, knowledge's "*somewhere* is as vital as surveying and explaining its *sometime* and *somebodies*." Thus, thinking geographically about knowledge helps understand how and why specific actions grounded by interpretations of knowledges emerged in different locations..<sup>11</sup> In political entities like the British Empire spatiality permeated the practices of everyday knowledge-making and governance in a variety of ways that has been analysed in "new imperial history" with the help of spatial metaphors such as webs, networks and circuits. As Alan Lester notes, such approaches motivate examinations of "multiple meanings, projects, material practices, performances and experiences of colonial relations" that were shaped by the colonial connections between the colonies and the metropolis, each other and other localities.<sup>12</sup>

Recently, Kapil Raj has suggested a turn towards spaces of circulation in order to depart from what he sees as the limitations of networks, namely that they do not recognise power-relations and that the directions of knowledge flows cannot always be easily recognized. According to Raj, "spaces of circulation structure the way in which knowledge flows within closely knit social groups." They have social and physical geographies, can be discontinuous linking together separate spaces and do not denote to a single European centre. Consequently, Raj advocates a spatial concept that enables acknowledging the constraints inherent in a networked understanding of knowledge production.<sup>13</sup>

Applied in the context of this essay, Raj's concept offers a tool to analyse how government officials made geographies of colonial Australia. Geographical knowledge circulated in the

Australian colonies and overseas via diverse media, both manuscript and print, composed and compiled by numerous agents. Additionally, an oral culture of communication linked actors together and sustained these circulations of knowledge. Uncovering their relative connections and disparities is key to understand the geographies of knowledge that existed. Such a task comes with methodological challenges that I tackle in this essay by approaching colonial and imperial archives as sites of knowledge production. Ann Laura Stoler argues in her study on the writerly forms of imperial governance that administrative documentation should be approached as “active, generative substances with histories, as documents with itineraries of their own” that reflect what she calls “colonial common sense.” Scrutinizing the colonial archives helps dissect these processes of naming and producing ontologies as it highlights the epistemic anxieties that underpinned colonial governance: “grids of intelligibility were fashioned from uncertain knowledge; disquiet and anxieties registered the uncommon sense of events and things.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense the colonial archives evince the many ways that the “disturbance of distance” mattered in an ocean-spanning empire.<sup>15</sup>

Tony Ballantyne echoes Stoler when he stresses the need to understand the circulation of knowledge that generated colonial archives and their organization as well as critically examining their nodal position within what he calls the knowledge-producing webs of empire. Ballantyne conceptualises imperial and colonial archives as hubs that testify for the centripetal processes that accumulate material to what becomes the archival collections. Simultaneously they “have a centrifugal function” as knowledge is distributed from them “through the act of reading, correspondence, the intertextual nature of print culture, or the exchange of manuscript or printed material.”<sup>16</sup> Applied to the world of geographical discovery, then, the records of the colonial and imperial archives reveal the diverse people

who sustained and connected the spaces of circulation such as explorers, indigenous peoples, mapmakers, settlers, and civil servants.

Taking these insights as starting points, I argue that the elusive place of northern Australia in colonial governance epitomizes the transformations of geographical knowledges into territorial governmentality. Based on manuscript and print material, this essay shows how different knowledge producers and material practices helped stitch together knowledges that underpinned the territorialisation of the north. The first section of the essay explores the epistolary networks and accumulation of colonial archives in different sites of knowledge production. Using Gregory's and Stuart's expeditions as examples I investigate the routine practices that constituted the flows of knowledge and how this related to the conceptualization of the territory. I draw attention to the social and geographical factors that affected the circulation of knowledge. The second section investigates how the exploration knowledges transformed into practices of colonial governance. I analyse the visions of Queensland and South Australia that sought to make the continent legible in different ways. My analysis identifies the entanglements between the plans, reflects their position in the colonial and imperial mind maps, and analyses the eventual decisions that were made.

### **Geographical Knowledge in Transit**

Viewed from the perspective of Colonial Office civil servants at Downing Street, London, the results of any expedition taking place in any part of the empire were intelligence to be handled in the appropriate manner. The execution of a government funded expedition such as Gregory's involved piles and piles of paper, scrutinising every single detail of the expedition, starting from its planning and ending with concerns over what should be done with the

information and material that had been produced, and importantly, how the knowledge should be applied in practice. From the 1830s onwards the system of annotations and minutes filling up the back pages and corners of the despatches offer glimpses into the empire's mundane practices of knowledge management that constituted colonial governance.<sup>17</sup> An intrinsic part of the daily tasks of the civil servants going through the bundles of despatches and their enclosures which varied between maps, paintings and specimens was to manage the information that the varied material communicated. This included – as the staff were not specialists of geography nor natural history – forwarding the material to those who were considered as such, and putting the materials received “in transit” yet again.<sup>18</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, at the time of Gregory's and Stuart's expeditions, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and mapmaker John Arrowsmith functioned as the Colonial Office's closest allies, often complemented by the agents of the other metropolitan scientific institutions such as the Geological Society and the Royal Botanical Garden at Kew. For example, when information about the proceedings of Gregory's expedition started to flow to London either via Singapore or Sydney, the civil servants carefully determined who should receive what and with what kind of conditions. The RGS received copies of most of Gregory's expedition members' reports, and information concerning botany and the specimens collected were sent to Kew.<sup>19</sup> Arrowsmith gained access to the tracings.<sup>20</sup>

The system of transmission reflected the civil servants understanding of an order of knowledge in Britain but was also foregrounded by their ideas of publicizing information; Arrowsmith was expected to publish updated maps available to the public, and the scientific societies to discuss, examine and display the material they received, thus determining their relative importance.

Publishing the expedition reports in Britain was a question of its own and demonstrates how the civil servants sought to make the results intelligible. Generally, most of the reports Australian explorers sent from the field to the settlements were published verbatim by the colonial newspapers. In Britain the demand for accounts of Australian expeditions was much slimmer than for those concerning Africa.<sup>21</sup> However, being an expedition funded by the parliament, it was considered necessary to publish an account in Britain even though the expedition was not deemed interesting enough to warrant its lengthy printing.<sup>22</sup> Many options were considered to resolve what should be “done with these broken fragments of the result of N. Aust. Expedition” in order to publish a compact official account. For example, Charles Sturt, who had explored central Australia a decade before and advised in the planning of the North Australian Expedition, was consulted to provide a review of the diverse reports that had arrived. Eventually all these preparations proved unnecessary as Gregory’s final report arrived and enclosed the particulars of the expedition in a condensed form. It was then printed with Sturt’s report and a map by Arrowsmith.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, allowing the RGS to publish Gregory’s full journal was contemplated in reference to Gregory’s assumed ambitions regarding the text. Most often explorers themselves sought out rights from their sponsors to publish an account via a Britain-based book publisher, like John Murray or Thomas and William Boone.<sup>24</sup> In Gregory’s case this was considered unlikely. Clerk Gordon Gairdner summarized the situation in January 1858:

We have no Official intimation on that subject, but I have been informed by the officers of the expedition with whom I have communicated that Mr. Gregory certainly has no such intention; and naturally so far there is no real variety in the descriptions of

Australian exploration and Captain Sturt & Sir T. Mitchell have certainly worn out the subject. I was informed that Sir T. Mitchell's last publication was a losing speculation.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, the RGS was allowed access to the journal with the condition that it would be returned immediately when the publication was complete as the journal was 'strictly a record of this Department', and the full account of the proceedings of the expedition appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*.<sup>26</sup> These circuits of publishing reports mark instances of what Stoler calls the 'pulse of the archive' and the 'fine crafts of cribbing and culling'.<sup>27</sup> What transpired provided links between the different spaces of circulation: leaps from the space of official correspondence and reporting into the public sphere as the travels on the Australian continent transformed into print in London.<sup>28</sup>

The civil servants' control over the documents relating to the North Australian Expedition contrasts with their inability to access the material relating to the first three expeditions of five conducted by John McDouall Stuart between 1858 and 1861. The expeditions' funders, land speculators James Chambers and William Finke controlled the information and material produced during these expeditions, with the South Australian government stepping in to fund the last two expeditions executed in 1860 and 1861. These coincided with the quest by the colony of Victoria to be the first to cross the continent and thus find a feasible route for the overland telegraph.<sup>29</sup> That Stuart's reports were not readily available for the governor to consult and forward to London is visible, for example, in Richard MacDonnell's despatch to London where he noted having gained access to only some of the information:

I have since had opportunities of reading Mr. Stuart's journal and of examining his map of the new country, which he has found. I now enclose a tracing of the latter, which does not however give all the particulars noted in a very much fuller maps prepared by Mr. Stuart for the use of Mr. James Chambers – the gentleman who has hitherto depassed all the cost of Mr. Stuart's explorations.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, the information that the governor of South Australia could forward was limited by local interests which included by-passing the colonial government. Indeed, the governor had received very general information which resulted in the speculations of what Stuart had actually discovered, especially in relation to the probable existence of an extensive gold field.<sup>31</sup> The situation escalated once Stuart returned from his third expedition, again giving his report and tracing to his sponsor and friend Chambers. Even though MacDonnell had initially been promised copies to help him report Stuart's findings to London, he did not receive them. Instead, he could only forward newspaper articles in lieu of manuscript reports and ended up having sealed documents at the government building, "on the condition that the seals be not broken till the mail has left – an arrangement which seems to afford satisfaction to Mr. Chambers".<sup>32</sup> MacDonnell reported the situation to London:

I can therefore only accompany this dispatch with a published extract from a letter of Mr. Stuart and also with an account of a banquet given to him and at which I had great pleasure in assisting – as the courage, energy and judgement of Mr. Stuart in accomplishing such an arduous undertaking with such inadequate means seem to be unrivalled in the History of Exploration on this Continent.<sup>33</sup>

This development in South Australia demonstrates one of the many factors that related to the circulation of knowledge in one and its non-circulation in another, connected social space. Chamber controlled the documents in order to protect his own interests. Since the beginning of the 1850s he, together with Finke, had been interested to develop the northern hinterlands into a passage across the continent and take advantage of the emerging lands.<sup>34</sup> Instead of passing the information via the official correspondence, Chambers and Finke engaged directly with individuals linked with the London scientific societies. Their correspondents included men like Roderick I. Murchison, then president of the RGS and known for his interest in the colonization of the antipodes.<sup>35</sup> Private epistolary networks like these were crucial vehicles through which the empire penetrated the daily lives of different types of people, generating connections not only between metropolis and colony but between colonies as well as beyond empire. The correspondence networks and social relations in the colonies of land speculators like Chambers and Finke constituted a different space of circulation that connected with that of the civil servants only partially.<sup>36</sup> For a metropolitan organization such as the RGS and a scientist like Murchison, direct connections with settler colonists and explorers overseas helped generate the RGS into what Driver terms a centre of information exchange.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, read at the Society's meeting in February 1861 the account of Stuart's explorations was noted to finally show "what Australia was made of."<sup>38</sup> At the Colonial Office these chains of events adjusted the regular system of managing the circulation of material. The staff for example noted that Arrowsmith should be notified that the map was arriving via other route as per normal.<sup>39</sup> Eventually, however, Chambers granted permission for the government to print and disseminate Stuart's journal and lithograph his map which MacDonnell then speedily transmitted to London.<sup>40</sup>

The instances outlined above showcase how the flows of knowledge were as much processes of control as they were of transfer. Identifying these transits or their obstacles helps outline the discontinuous and connected spaces of circulation that came to exist in colonial Australia and Britain. Understanding the underlying circulations in cases like Gregory's and McDouall Stuart's expeditions helps comprehend the fluid nature and partiality of colonial archives and the temporalities of knowledge formation that the mobile documents helped generate.

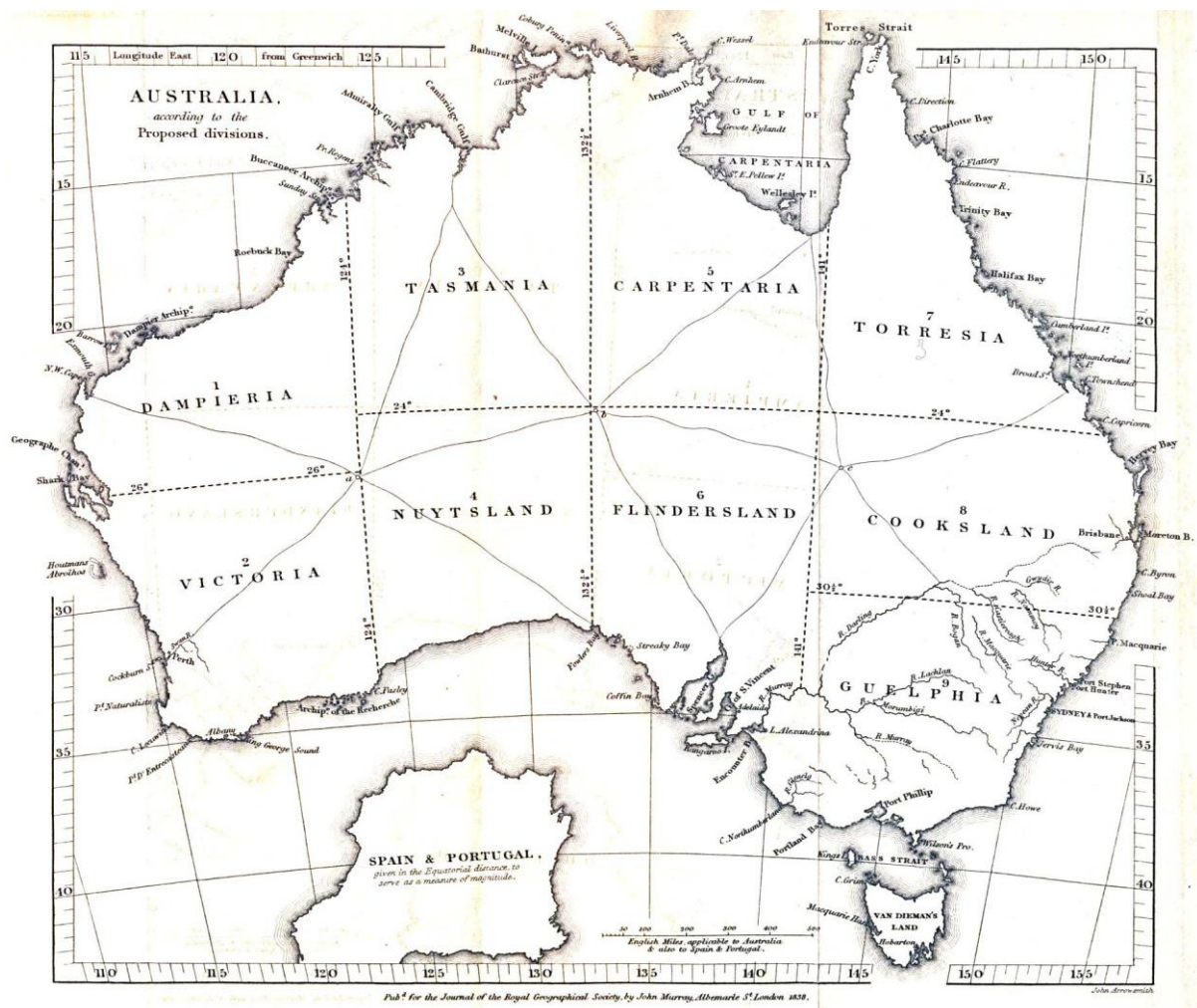
Caroline Cornish and Felix Driver highlight the importance of attending to the circulations that have constituted the creation of diverse institutional collections, in their case botanical collections.<sup>41</sup> I argue that in a similar manner as the distribution logs of the museum of economic botany, the Colonial Office correspondence with its minutes and annotations can be read as a record of the distribution of knowledge within and beyond government offices that led to the accumulation of different types of document collections. Simultaneously they offer a starting point to analyse how the travelling knowledge received new meanings as it was received in different locations. The next section highlights this by analysing how exploration knowledges transformed into ideas of territorial colonial governmentality.

### **Territorializing Geographical Knowledge**

The British practices of territorializing the Australian continent developed from strategic interests, the realities of governance and land use and the mobilization of geographical knowledge to serve these arguments. A common discourse concerned the best way to divide the continent into productive and efficiently governed territories. This question had been debated for decades. For example, in 1838 the Royal Geographical Society published in its journal an article by Captain John Vetch discussing the best way to divide the continent into governable territories with similar resources. Building on the delineation of the recently

established South Australian colony, Vetch suggested dividing the continent into nine territories roughly the size of the Iberian Peninsula (see Figure 2).<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 2: Map of Australia, 1838.** John Vetch envisioned an Australia divided into territories that were approximately the size of the Iberian Peninsula, which he took to be a convenient size for a territory governed from one centre. Mapmaker John Arrowsmith engraved the map and the Royal Geographical Society published it accompanying Vetch's article in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, volume 8, 1838. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Even though nothing came of Vetch's proposal at the time, the same discussions concerning how to best govern the vast continent by dividing it into territories and desires to completely occupy the continent emerged forcefully especially in the wake of Gregory's, Stuart's and Burke's and Wills' expeditions in the beginning of the 1860s. In contrast to Vetch, however, the participants of these discussions could draw on diverse pieces of geographical knowledge deriving from the field. Exploration knowledge reported by the likes of Gregory and Stuart was used to support differing claims concerning the most natural and efficient way to redraw the boundary lines between the colonies. Following these arguments, this section analyses how the political geography of the continent was reconfigured in a particular space of circulation. This illustrates how the scramble of the continent connected with the circulation of geographical knowledge and its perceived links with the organization of colonial governance. When analysed closely, these discussions showcase the meanings and consequences that geographical knowledge of northern Australia had for actors in different parts of the globe.

The British drawing and redrawing of territorial boundaries in Australia was constituted by their asserted sovereignty over the whole continent. Following James Cook's claim for the eastern half of the landmass, the British expanded their areas of influence by establishing other settlements, with that at Swan River enabling the claim for the whole continent. Unlike in other parts of the world, British invasion and dispossession of the indigenous peoples of the continent occurred without treaties.<sup>43</sup> It also transpired without serious rivalry from other European countries, making the continent a testing ground for the administration of vast tracts of land. At the most abstract level, the management of the continent's geography concerned the establishment of intercolonial boundary lines that defined the organization of governance and the extent of the governors' jurisdictions. Here maps helped enforce the

connection between territory and the world 'out there'. In practice knowing where the border line drawn according to a latitudinal or a longitudinal line lay on the ground was impossible and even when surveyed subject to dispute. It was also unnecessary when an area did not require direct administrative measures.<sup>44</sup> For decades most of the boundaries of the colonies lay in what for the British was unmapped and unsettled country. This resembled what Lauren Benton has noted in the context of North America: "the specificity of geometric coordinates was set against indeterminacy," making the relation between imperial order and geographical information unstable.<sup>45</sup> Even though "natural" boundaries were the preferred means to design territories, in Australia these only surfaced on selected occasions like when the boundary of Victoria was assigned to the Murray River. Consequently, in the early 1860s the majority of boundaries were obscure, difficult to track down in the field, and anything but "natural." Furthermore, they did not in any way recognize the position of Indigenous Australian peoples or their territorialities and disabled their free use of land. Even though from 1860 the colonial governments started to set aside lands for Aboriginal people as reserves, the land remained in state control. The expansion to the north resulted in extended conflicts beyond governmental control.<sup>46</sup>

Pleas to reconsider how the north should be occupied originated both from London and the Australian colonies. Their shared destination was most often the Colonial Office and the secretary of state. For instance, in September 1860, after Stuart had just returned from his latest expedition during which he had reached the same latitudes from the south that Gregory had advanced to from the north, the governor of the newly founded colony of Queensland, George Bowen, sought for a clarification of the western boundary, of which confusion existed in the colony. Bowen argued that for the better administration of the continent the boundary should be extended to the 138° meridian to enable incorporating the so-called

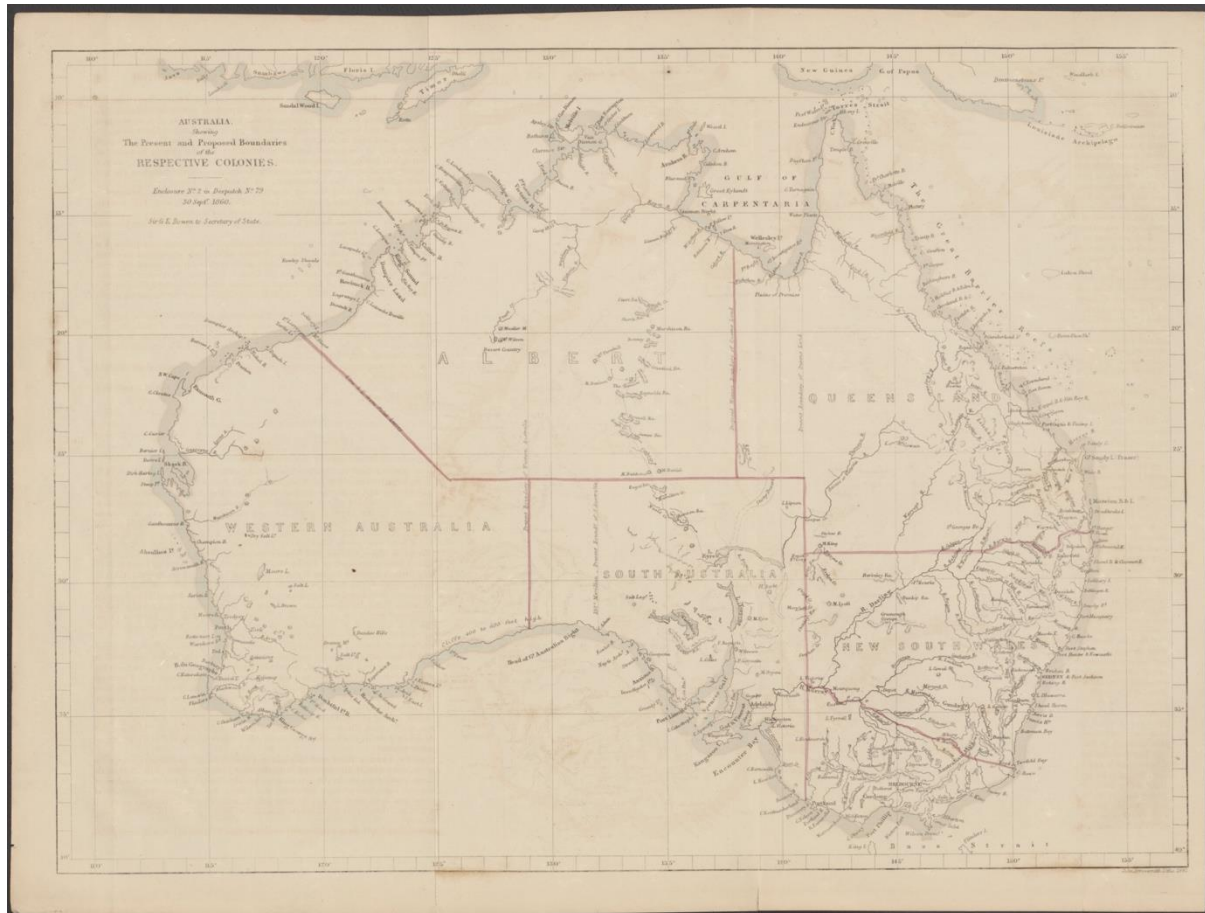
Plains of Promise and the “only safe harbour in the Gulf of Carpentaria” to the colony.

Additionally, Bowen suggested establishing a new convict colony called Albert at the Victoria River, where convict labour could be beneficially used in isolation.<sup>47</sup>

Bowen supported his case by enclosing a memorandum and a map from Augustus C. Gregory, now surveyor-general of Queensland, and an extract from a text by John Dunmore Lang, “another writer of large Colonial experience,” a colonist well known at the Colonial Office. Gregory bridged a connection with the physical geography of the country to the desirable location of the colony’s boundaries as well as the shape of the new colony, for which a slice of Western Australia would be cut off to incorporate the small hills located by Gregory’s party (see Figure 3). This suggestion significantly resembled those Gregory had submitted as part of his final report concerning the expedition a few years earlier and which had been printed in the parliamentary papers.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Lang argued for the completion of the occupation of the continent by describing the possibilities that Victoria offered for the British once convict force had been used to lay the basis for a new settlement, or even a series of settlements.<sup>49</sup> A few months later Bowen repeated his request and argued that “a glance at the Map will remind Your Grace that it [the area adjacent to the Gulf of Carpentaria] can be rendered practically available by Queensland alone” and the other colonies were separated from it, for example South Australia “by the whole breadth of the continent of New Holland.”<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 3: Map of Australia, 1860.** Augustus C. Gregory’s plan was to adjust the division of the northern parts of Australia into more governable territories. Governor of Queensland, George Bowen, sent the map, titled “Australia, showing the present and proposed boundaries of the respective colonies” to London to visualize Gregory’s idea. The red lines delineate the

boundaries of the proposed colonies, with the suggested colony of Albert occupying the central north. The map also shows the position of the colony of Queensland which was separated from New South Wales in 1859. Source: MAP RM 4459, National Library of Australia.



Bowen's dispatches effectively crafted an interpretation of the geography of the north and its implications for the practice of colonial governance. The suggestion concerning the use of convicts exemplifies how governable geographies were fashioned with the 'material' provided by transportation. This seems to supplement Clare Anderson's argument that in the British Empire "the penal role of transportation" entangled with "its function as a means of labour supply, colonial governmentality and permanent settlement."<sup>51</sup> During this transformative period in convict transportation to Australia the suggestion was troublesome.

Indeed, following Gregory's expedition the matter had been considered, but consecutively abandoned.<sup>52</sup> The use of convict labour had constituted the functioning of the British settlements in New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania), and Port Phillip until transportation had ceased to these destinations in 1840, 1849 and 1853 respectively. Starting in 1850, however, Western Australia, which had been formed without convict labour, had become a recipient of convicts and would continue to do so until 1868.<sup>53</sup>

In London the civil servants were sympathetic of Bowen's need to locate the western boundary, considering that clerk Gordon Gairdner noted in his annotation that "I believe that there was no definite idea on the subject [when the colony was established]. The boundaries adopted were those furnished at last by the N. S. Wales Gov."<sup>54</sup> The suggestion for the creation of a new colony was not abandoned as such but it was deemed important not to entangle "Her Majesty's Government in any arrangement which may turn out inconvenient, on the ground of mere anticipations or projects, or on notions of fitness founded on our present geographical knowledge." Crucially, the reply letter to Bowen informed him that others were interested in the area too: the governor of South Australia, Richard McDonnell, had just send in an application for the extension of the South Australian territory to the north. This had occurred in the wake of the ill-fated success of the Victorian exploring expedition led by Robert O'Hara Burke and William Wills to cross the continent. The party, save one, had perished during their travel back to the south from the shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Furthermore, another group in Victoria had expressed desires to form a colony in the area.<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, a debate emerged over the most convenient and natural geographical connection to the area in the official correspondence, the colonial newspapers and via other print products such as maps. The intercolonial connections via sea and post grew in the

1850s, and thus provided the media opportunities to increasingly report about the developments in the other colonies, such as the results of the expeditions, at a more rapid pace. The print media and the various pamphlets were important in mobilizing geographical knowledge in the public sphere.<sup>56</sup> The apparent availability of the north generated numerous privately organized designs for the colonization of the north immediately after Gregory's return and in the early 1860s. For example, one John Hall published in Melbourne, in 1862, a pamphlet defending the colonization of "Prince Albert Land" by establishing the first settlement, "Burke City," on the Albert River based on the latest exploration knowledge. Accompanied with a map, the pamphlet noted that "The colonization of the northern parts of this country, the most fertile of the Australian continent, has long been looked for. The time has now arrived."<sup>57</sup> Similar plans emerged also in London where for example in 1858 one P. MacAndrew from East London approached the secretary of state to suggest the establishment of a new post for cotton trade at the Gulf of Carpentaria.<sup>58</sup> These suggestions and ideas for the use of the northern lands showcases how geographical knowledges and designs (such as Gregory's Albert colony) concerning colonial Australia gained meaning and value in the social networks of diverse groups of people. They highlight how individuals with differing interests in making profit out of the Australian terrain eagerly picked up suggestions and speculations.

The argued expediency of establishing a new colony did not convince the Colonial Office. However, the smaller territorial claims of Queensland and South Australia were accepted and first in July 1861 the western boundary of South Australia and then in March 1862 the western boundary of Queensland were extended.<sup>59</sup> A turning point in Britain emerged from Charles Nicholson's letter to the secretary of state Duke of Newcastle urging the establishment of a new colony or the annexation of the territory to Queensland to organize

the governance of the area.<sup>60</sup> Nicholson had returned to Britain from Australia in 1862, where he had for nearly thirty years careered, for example, as a physician, landowner, business developer, politician and participated in the establishment of Australia's first university in Sydney.<sup>61</sup> He had close connections with the metropolitan scientists and had been immediately attached to the council of the RGS at the request of the Society's president Murchison.<sup>62</sup> The arrival of someone well versed with the developments of settlement and warning that it might become an area beyond government control (as the boundary Queensland was now officially fixed to the 138° meridian) appears to have concretized the need to divert from the "do nothing" policy Newcastle was known for. A temporary resolution was needed to generate tools to control the current and future squatters. A plan reflecting the metropolitan conceptualization of the easiest way to renew the political geography of the continent, drawing on the physical geography was composed at the Colonial Office. The Duke of Newcastle forwarded to Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia a suggestion where South Australia and Queensland both would acquire a portion of the northern area. The area below the tropics would be annexed to South Australia and that in the north to Queensland. Letters from Nicholson and the Colonial Land and Emigration Office, which the Colonial Office had consulted for advice, accompanied the dispatch.<sup>63</sup>

The civil servants learned the reactions from South Australia first: the governor Dominick Daly opposed the suggestion. Daly quoted John McKinlay, who had conducted the most recent explorations in the area and Daly argued that the area was most accessible from South Australia: "the migrations must come chiefly from the settled parts of the north of this colony (South Australia) or from the same latitudes of New South Wales, the Queensland frontier being barely practicable to cross stock from that Province with safety."<sup>64</sup> The report from the

colony's executive council, attached to Daly's letter, enforced the idea of South Australia's natural connection to the area:

[T]o annex the Victorian River territory provisionally to Queensland, would be to retard its occupation, while to attach it provisionally to South Australia, would expedite its settlement: promote an extensive trade in horses with India, and bring these Colonies into more speedy telegraphic communication with Europe.<sup>65</sup>

For these South Australians the north was a “new world” with countless economic possibilities, and they fashioned the movement in favour of its entire annexation as a uniform mission.<sup>66</sup> Not knowing what the opinion of Queensland would be, the civil servants reacted cautiously. Frederick Rogers noted that “I will only observe that the question is not who discovered the country nor (I should say) what would promote its most immediate colonization but by what Government it can be most effectively controlled.” In his view, “it is much more likely to be connected with Brisbane of Q [...] But wait till we hear from Sir G. Bowen.”<sup>67</sup>

To the Colonial Office's surprise Bowen too opposed the metropolitan plan, but for other reasons. His dispatch stated that in fact the area would be best placed under the South Australian control. Bowen relied again on Gregory's recommendation about the natural way to, following the known geography, to make the area governable. Gregory presented that a new colony placed under the control of an already existing government should be established. In his view South Australia is the best candidate as Queensland did not currently have enough

resources and Western Australia is not in a convenient or able position either. He stressed that this view countered the intuitive reading of a map of Australia. Gregory argued:

[A] superficial glance at the map would perhaps tend to the Impression that Western Australia, within the nominal boundary of which a large extent of “Albert” is comprised, would be the first, Queensland the second, and South Australia the third colony in the list, as regards the facilities for local management.<sup>68</sup>

Queensland’s opposition meant that only one option remained: South Australia. Thus, the Colonial Office ordered the Colonial Land and Emigration Office to immediately compose an order in council that would enable placing the territory under South Australian rule.<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, from July 1863 South Australia could boast having direct connection with the northern coast and the trade networks of the Indian Ocean. This lay the foundation for what would be called “the Great Central State” that quickly became a contested part of the colony’s politics.<sup>70</sup> Eventually South Australia’s claims for the naturalness of their control of the northern region, their capabilities in enforcing its governance and most importantly their wishes regarding the available resources did not materialize as anticipated. Indeed, the administration and efforts to benefit from the economic potential resulted in a public debt of 4 million pounds. As early as 1866, the South Australian government reported to London about failures to locate suitable lands for settlement.<sup>71</sup>

According to Stoler, “partial understandings, epistemic confusion” were unavoidable parts of colonial governance. Tracking down instances of these helps uncover what she calls

“competing conventions of credibility about what and whose evidence could be trusted.”<sup>72</sup> To a certain extent the decisions about northern Australia concerned the credibility of the discussants. In Queensland the opinion of Gregory, who was “universally admitted to be the man of all men best qualified to pronounce an opinion on this subject,” heavily influenced the final position that the colony took regarding the central north.<sup>73</sup> In South Australia reactions to news concerning the annexation of the territory were generally positive, and it is likely that its promoters genuine believe in the areas capabilities was a reflection of ignorance rather than deceit. Some doubts did start to emerge when due to a political crisis a new government was formed with members who had disputed the annexation. Consequently, in the coming years the area “had to be settled by men [...] who had opposed its acquisition as a waste of public money.”<sup>74</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This essay has analysed the reconfiguration of the political geography of Australia in the wake of the explorations of the 1850s and early 1860s. The “scramble for Australia” and the shifting position of the scarcely known central north exemplifies how geographical knowledge was utilized as proof for competing purposes by individuals and civil servants of the colonial and imperial governments. Knowledge as well as ignorance constituted the successful argumentations for the most convenient way of organizing the governance of the vast continental space and creating governable territories. Tony Ballantyne has noted that “nineteenth-century colonial culture was by its very nature porous, fluid and (...) it was energised by the circulation of people, ideas, and ideologies through and almost bewildering array of institutions, networks, and forms of cultural production.”<sup>75</sup> The colonial archives analysed in this chapter highlight this porousness but simultaneously offer clues to understand

the processes that made knowledge and pursued action. Investigating the territorialisation of northern Australia highlights the “inter-regional and transnational structures that enabled the integrative, if highly uneven, work of modern imperial systems.”<sup>76</sup> Following the movements of material like the reports of explorers in transoceanic and colonial spaces reveals how different spaces linked together. The colonial archives reflect the spaces of circulation they were part of both physically and socially. Approached as sites of knowledge production these archives like the Colonial Office’s, therefore, demonstrate the geographies of making geographies of colonial Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> The Northern Territory is presently one of the most diverse linguistic areas in the world. See David H. Horton, *The Aiatsis Map of Indigenous Australia* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1996) for reference of the diversity of the language, social and nation groups of Indigenous Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Donovan, *A Land Full of Possibilities. A History of South Australia’s Northern Territory* (St. Lucia, London, New York: University of Queensland Press, 1981), 10-20; James M.R. Cameron, “The Northern Settlements: Outposts of Empire,” in *The Origins of Australia’s Capital Cities*, ed. Pamela Statham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Dane Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces. Exploring Africa and Australia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 104.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart MacIntyre and Sean Scalmer, “Colonial States and Civil Society, 1860–90,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia. Volume 1. Indigenous and Colonial Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart MacIntyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 189, 194.

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<sup>5</sup> Norman Etherington, “Recovering the Imperial Context of the Exploration of Northern Australia,” in *European Perceptions of Terra Australis*, eds. Anne M. Scott, Alfred Hiatt, Claire McIlroy and Christopher Wortham (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 233–46.

<sup>6</sup> Deirdre Morris, “Stuart, John McDouall (1815–1866),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, available at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stuart-john-mcdouall-4662/text7707> (accessed 1 January 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Responsible government was granted to the settler constituencies in the following order: Victoria (1851), New South Wales (1855), South Australia (1856), Queensland (1859) and Western Australia (1890).

<sup>8</sup> For the expedition see Sarah Murgatroyd, *The Dig Tree: The Story of Burke and Wills* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> *The Courier*, 18 December 1861.

<sup>10</sup> Johanna Skurnik, “Cartographic Histories of the Western Territorialization of Northern Australia, 1840s–1900s. Global Circuits of Knowledge and the Mapmakers’ Craft” (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2020), 331–58.

<sup>11</sup> David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers, “Thinking Geographically About Nineteenth-Century Science,” in *Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3

<sup>12</sup> Alan Lester, “Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire,” *History Compass* 4, no. 1 (2006): 131–32. Also see Zoë Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections, 1815–45: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Brett M. Bennett and Joseph M. Hodge, eds., *Science and Empire. Knowledge and Networks of Science across the British Empire, 1800-1970* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> Kapil Raj, “Networks of Knowledge, or Spaces of Circulation? The Birth of British Cartography in Colonial South Asia in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *Global Intellectual History* 1883 (2017), 1–18; idem, “Spaces of Circulation and Empires of Knowledge. Ethnolinguistics and Cartography in Early Colonial India,” in *Empires of Knowledge. Scientific Networks in the Early Modern World*, ed. Paula Findlen (London: Routledge, 2018), 275, 287–88.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1–3.

<sup>15</sup> I am quoting from Felix Driver, “Distance and Disturbance : Travel , Exploration and Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 14 (2004), 73–92.

<sup>16</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire : Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 180–81, 190–91.

<sup>17</sup> Their introduction related to the renewal of administrative practices, see Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections*, 49–54.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. James A. Secord, 'Knowledge in Transit', *Isis* 95, no. 4 (2004): 654–72.

<sup>19</sup> E. g. Annotations in Denison to Labouchere 20 March 1856 no 52, CO201/493, The National Archives (hereafter TNA); Annotations and draft letters in Foreign Office to Merivale 4 November 1856, CO201/496, TNA; Merivale to Hooker 19 June 1857 and Merivale to Hooker 24 September 1857, Miscellaneous reports, MCR/7/5/10, Royal Botanical Gardens.

<sup>20</sup> Minute by Gairdner in RGS to Colonial Office 29 October 1856, CO201/496, TNA.

<sup>21</sup> Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces*, 254.

<sup>22</sup> Annotations in Denison to Labouchere 4 April 1857 no 65, CO201/498, TNA.

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<sup>23</sup> Annotations in Denison to Labouchere 22 June 1857 no 93, CO201/499, TNA; *Papers relating to an expedition recently undertaken for the purpose of exploring the northern portion of Australia*, Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty, London 1857.

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces*, 254. For the practices of publishing see Innes M. Keighren, Charles W. J. Withers, and Bill Bell, *Travels into Print : Exploration, Writing, and Publishing with John Murray, 1773-1859* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Minute by Gairdner 21 January in Murchison to Colonial Office 19 January 1858, CO201/506, TNA.

<sup>26</sup> Minute by Gairdner 21 January in Murchison to Colonial Office 19 January 1858, CO201/506, TNA. See *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol. 28 (1858), 1-137.

<sup>27</sup> Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 19–20.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Keighren, Withers, and Bell, *Travels into Print*.

<sup>29</sup> Kennedy, *The Last Blank Spaces*, 104–5.

<sup>30</sup> MacDonnell to Lytton 14 August 1859 no 338, CO13/100, TNA.

<sup>31</sup> MacDonnell to Lytton 14 August 1859 no 338, CO13/100, TNA.

<sup>32</sup> MacDonnell to Newcastle 26 Oct 1860 No 436, CO13/102, TNA.

<sup>33</sup> MacDonnell to Newcastle 26 Oct 1860 No 436, CO13/102, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Jack Cross, *The Great Central State. The Foundation of the Northern Territory* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2011), 4–6.

<sup>35</sup> Annotations in MacDonnell to Newcastle 26 October 1860 no 436, CO13/102, TNA; *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London (PRGS)*, 5:2, 1861, 55-60; *PRGS*, 5:3, 1861, 104-106. For Murchison see Robert A. Stafford, *Scientist of Empire: Sir Roderick*

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*Murchison, Scientific Exploration and Victorian Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chapter 2.

<sup>36</sup> See Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire*; Laura Ishiguro, *Nothing to Write Home about: British Family Correspondence and the Settler Colonial Everyday in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 36–37.

<sup>38</sup> *Adelaide Observer*, 27 April 1861.

<sup>39</sup> Annotation by Gairdner in MacDonnell to Newcastle 26 October 1860 no 436, CO13/102, TNA. Compare annotations in MacDonnell to Newcastle 26 December 1860 no 469, CO13/103, TNA.

<sup>40</sup> MacDonnell to Newcastle 26 December 1860 no 469, CO13/103, TNA.

<sup>41</sup> Caroline Cornish and Felix Driver, “‘Specimens Distributed’: The Circulation of Objects from Kew’s Museum of Economic Botany, 1847-1914”, *Journal of the History of Collections* fhz008, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Considerations on the Political Geography and Geographical Nomenclature of Australia, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 8 (1838), 157-169.

<sup>43</sup> Saliha Belmessous, “The Tradition of Treaty Making in Australian History,” in *Empire by Treaty : Negotiating European Expansion, 1600-1900*, ed. Saliha Belmessous (Oxford University Press, 2014), 186–213. For the early history of the newcomers see Shino Konishi and Maria Nugent, “Newcomers, c. 1600-1800,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia. Volume 1. Indigenous and Colonial Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart MacIntyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 43–67; Grace Karskens, “The Early Colonial Presence, 1788-1822,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia. Volume 1.*

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*Indigenous and Colonial Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 91–120; Lisa Ford and David Andrew Roberts, “Expansion, 1820–50,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia. Volume 1. Indigenous and Colonial Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121–48.

<sup>44</sup> An illustrating example in the Australian context is the boundary between South Australia and New South Wales (and later Victoria) which was debated and surveyed several times from the 1830s on. See Gerard Carney, “A Legal and Historical Overview of the Land Borders of the Australian States,” *Australian Law Journal* 90, no. 8 (2016), 590–93.

<sup>45</sup> Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty : Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>46</sup> MacIntyre and Scalmer, “Colonial States and Civil Society, 1860–90,” 214–15.

<sup>47</sup> Bowen to Newcastle 30 September 1860, no 79, CO234/2, TNA. The confusion had emerged from the publication of the NSW Law Officer’s opinion regarding the position of the boundary as one following the 141<sup>st</sup> meridian.

<sup>48</sup> Compare Enclosure 1 in Bowen to Newcastle 30 September 1860, no 79, CO234/2, TNA and *Papers relating to an expedition recently undertaken for the purpose of exploring the northern portion of Australia*. The map was John Arrowsmith (lith.), *Australia, showing the present and proposed boundaries of the respective colonies*. Enclosure no. 2 in Dispatch no. 79, 30 Sept. 1860, Sir G.E. Bowen to Secretary of State (London, 1861), MAP RM 4459, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA).

<sup>49</sup> Enclosure 3 in Bowen to Newcastle 30 September 1860, no 79, CO234/2, TNA. I have not been able to identify the source of the extract.

<sup>50</sup> Bowen to Newcastle 8 December 1860 no 92, CO 234/2, TNA.

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<sup>51</sup> Clare Anderson, “Transnational Histories of Penal Transportation: Punishment, Labour and Governance in the British Imperial World, 1788–1939,” *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 3 (September 2016), 396.

<sup>52</sup> See annotations in Chimmo to Colonial Office 20 January 1857, CO201/501, TNA; Minute in Bowen to Newcastle 30 September 1860, no 79, CO234/2, TNA.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, “Transnational Histories of Penal Transportation, 1788–1939,” 382–83.

<sup>54</sup> Annotation by Gairdner in Bowen to Newcastle 30 September 1860, no 79, CO234/2, TNA.

<sup>55</sup> Newcastle to Bowen 26 February 1861, published in *The Courier* 20 May 1861.

<sup>56</sup> MacIntyre and Scalmer, “Colonial States and Civil Society, 1860–90,” 194.

<sup>57</sup> 10491.bbb.38.(6.),7, British Library (BL). Albert Land was also mentioned in an atlas of Australia published in Melbourne in 1863 by French-born Frederick Proeschel (1809-1870). See Maps 32.D.37, BL.

<sup>58</sup> MacAndrew to the Secretary of State 23 April 1858, CO201/507, TNA.

<sup>59</sup> Carney, “A Legal and Historical Overview of the Land Borders of the Australian States,” 590, 593.

<sup>60</sup> House of Commons papers, no 506, North Australia. Copy or extracts of correspondence between the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the governors of the Australian colonies, respecting the annexation of the crown lands around the Gulf of Carpentaria, 17-19.

<sup>61</sup> David S. Macmillan, “Nicholson, Sir Charles (1808–1903)”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, available at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/nicholson-sir-charles-2508/text3387> (accessed 1 January 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Roderick Weir Home, *Australian Science in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 90.

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- <sup>63</sup> See draft letters to governors and Nicholson in Murdoch to Rogers 19 August 1862, CO234/7, TNA; Cross, *The Great Central State*, 10–11.
- <sup>64</sup> Daly to Newcastle 26 November 1862 no 68, CO13/110, TNA.
- <sup>65</sup> Enclosure 1 in Daly to Newcastle 26 November 1862 no 68, CO13/110, TNA. These points were repeated in the next despatch where the results of Stuart's successful overland expedition were reported. See Daly to Newcastle 26 December 1862 no 73, CO13/110, TNA.
- <sup>66</sup> Donovan, *A Land Full of Possibilities*.
- <sup>67</sup> Annotation by Rogers in Daly to Newcastle 26 November 1862 no 68, CO13/110, TNA.
- <sup>68</sup> Enclosure no 2 and Draft letter to Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners in Bowen to Newcastle 18 January 1863 no 5, CO234/8, TNA.
- <sup>69</sup> Enclosure no 2 and Draft letter to Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners in Bowen to Newcastle 18 January 1863 no 5, CO234/8, TNA.
- <sup>70</sup> Cross, *The Great Central State*, 15–16.
- <sup>71</sup> Daly to Carnarvon 27 September 1866 no 45, CO13/119, TNA; Donovan, *A Land Full of Possibilities*, xx.
- <sup>72</sup> Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 185.
- <sup>73</sup> Bowen to Newcastle 18 January 1863 no 5, CO234/8, TNA.
- <sup>74</sup> Donovan, *A Land Full of Possibilities*, 38-40; Cross, *The Great Central State*, 7, 17–18.
- <sup>75</sup> Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire*, 191.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.