

**reduced to insignificance:
valuing emotion and empathy**

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*(in)significance:
a discussion about values and valuing in heritage*

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reduced to insignificance

‘You can intellectually engage with something quite quickly ... to emotionally and spiritually engage takes quite along time.’

Grayson Perry 2014. *Playing to the Gallery* London: Penguin, page 5

In Australian heritage practice, the ‘statement of cultural significance’ is a keystone of management decision-making. Constructed via a thresholds-based values approach, statements of values typically present as empirical, expert, and emotionally detached. In this presentation I advocate for the careful and context appropriate inclusion of intimate and affective expressions of heritage. To argue the case, I draw on work undertaken at Old Currango, a pastoral homestead in the Southern Alps region of Australia, and theories of attachment, affect, and assemblage. By applying experiential understanding, narrative structure, and auto-ethnography, I consider how statements of heritage values can express the power of the personal in ways that can elicit empathy from those publics with a care and concern for special places.

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Old Currango homestead dates to the 1870s and served as a pastoral outstation until 1955. After this date, the building gradually fell into disrepair and, in 1979, the NPWS proposed to manage it as a ruin. However, in 1986, there was a change of heart and management approach: the NPWS offered support to the Kosciuszko Huts Association to restore the building. Today it is a restored and well maintained heritage place and emergency shelter.



Old Currango homestead, Kosciuszko National Park
Photo credit: Allan McLean, 2010

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‘The suite of huts associated with pastoralism collectively have national significance in terms of historic and social values... The complex has social value as representing a way of life that has an iconic, if somewhat romanticised, status in Australia... Most huts represent the labour and lives of pastoral workers, small-time prospectors and migrant workers...’

Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management 2006, pages 85, 87

This quote, from the 2006 *Kosciuszko National Park Management Plan*, concerns the suite of some 70 intact ‘huts’ in the park. Social value for these structures is expressed in terms of their representing the labour and lives of workers. Personally I find this kind of description, while not inaccurate, to be cold and clinical. Why are the experiences of hardship, camaraderie, pleasure, and pain subsumed by ‘fact’? There are numerous vibrant accounts and memories of pastoralists, prospectors, and migrants who have lived and worked in the region.

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‘Given the degree of repairs and rebuilding of the homestead, and the degree of change from the original homestead complex with the removal of the north west wing, the hut is not considered to be of State Significance in its own right.’

NPWS Heritage Action Statement 2007, page 27

This statement is specific to Old Currango. It comes from a 2007 NPWS management document for the place. It is typical of many values statements that privilege fabric – the architectural and archaeological evidence over the social values and the lives of those who lived, worked, and visited Old Currango. It is an example of what I term a ‘fabric over feelings’ heritage narrative.

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Can I write a statement of values for Old Currango that incorporates emotion? I will attempt to by drawing on an oral testimony, a series of conversations, and letter exchanges I had with Dorothy Constance. The statement draws on two necessary methodologies: narrative and empathy.



Above. Dorothy Constance, Cooma
Photo credit: Steve Brown, 2013

Top left: Thelma (left) and Dorothy Reid at Old Currango.
Photo credit: Vera Reid, c.1940. Courtesy Dorothy Constance

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Dorothy Constance, one of eight siblings, grew up at Old Currango. She has fond memories and incredible stories of her childhood years spent there (1936–1942). On revisiting her childhood home as an adult in the early 1980s Dorothy felt sadness because the homestead was falling down. On a second return visit in 2002, she was pleased to see the restored house, now cared for by the Kosciuszko Huts Association and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. Dorothy said: “It'd be a pity if it wasn't there.” Dorothy’s experience of Old Currango demonstrates, and is representative of, powerful attachments that people hold for lived-in buildings and their settings in Kosciuszko National Park. Her experiences and emotions parallel those of author Miles Franklin who, in *Childhood at Brindabella* (1963), writes of the significance of childhood experience and adult memories of home in the remote and inspiring Australian Alps.

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In this mini-narrative values statement, I draw on Dorothy's changing perspectives – perspectives 'internal' to the narrative – to express personal experience, feelings and psychological states or emotions (e.g., fondness, sadness, and pleasure). The narrative invites the audience to 'pick up on' Dorothy's perspective. The narrative also tells the reader something of time (from childhood to adulthood; from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century), memory, and place: that is, Old Currango as multiple places – geographical, experienced, and imagined. The narrative also incorporates an 'external' evaluative perspective – evident in the last two sentences where I broaden Dorothy's experiences into a wider nexus of landscape settings (Kosciuszko National Park and the Australian Alps) and recognise similarities with another adult's memories of childhood – that of celebrated author Miles Franklin. As the narrator, I have also sought an empathic response by drawing on the reader's experiential understanding of childhood places to relate to Dorothy's experiences at Old Currango. Thus I have sought to make explicit connections between individual feelings and heritage value.

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Some references

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