

FACT AND FICTION IN THE OTHER COUNTRY

Speaker: Stephen Scourfield

On 3 June 2009, Stephen Scourfield, who is both an author and Travel Editor of *The West Australian*, presented an illustrated talk to the Kimberley Society. His summary appears below, with a preamble that mentions a trip undertaken immediately after the talk.

I was thrilled to meet everyone at the Kimberley Society – and in our brief conversations, names were mentioned, stations named, and experiences retold that added to what I fondly think of as the northern encyclopaedia growing inside me.

I have never pretended to be anything more than a visitor to the Kimberley, though I have been there certainly more than 100 times, sometimes for a long time, and have written hundreds of thousands of words about the area.

Recent travels, and articles in Travel in *The West Australian*, have been on the development and traineeships at Home Valley Station, on Gibb River Road by the Pentecost River, which on one hand is now a terrific place to stay, and on the other is offering a constructive future, with qualifications possible in everything from horticulture to tour guiding, and to Faraway Bay, which intrigued me as much, or more, for the coastline it is on as for the place itself.

The last trip which ended in the Kimberley began on June 4, the morning after my talk to the Kimberley Society. With Glen Chidlow, chief executive of Australia's North-West tourism, I drove the Warlu Way, a new drive trail from Exmouth to Broome which encourages travellers to swing in through Karijini and Millstream-Chichester National Parks.

After the very first night, there was a bit of a fuss because I had lost my passport at the hotel in Exmouth.

"Why did you have your passport, anyway," someone asked.

I made a joke about crossing the border and when Glen and I finally set out on that long, straight road up Eighty Mile Beach, sure as anything we felt a bump when we crossed the border.

This feeling is somewhat at the core of my novel *Other Country*, set mostly along some fictionalized version of the Gibb River Road and concluding in the East Kimberley.

The Kimberley is a learnt place for me. I grew up on the Malvern Hills, in the West Country of England – a wonderfully pleasant rural English childhood, with horses, donkeys and laneways.

I was working in London and recruited by *The West Australian* to come here. The first week I was writing here, I was writing for "specialists" – people who lived here, and perhaps were born here.

The place had to be learnt, and I started with the geology, flora and fauna – but it also involves the clothing, dialogue, utes, Aussie Rules, history, agriculture, styles of horse riding, you name it. I have a decent collection of Akubras (I *need* a decent collection of Akubras). Who would wear a sheep farmer's hat to a cattle station?

I learnt WA and more specifically I set out to learn the Kimberley. Not long after I had, I was sent on assignment to muster with Aboriginal stockmen in the Kimberley. It was the start of something.

It has been an intense relationship with place, and a place of intense friendships.

Other Country has come from more than 20 years of this intensity – and I still find it interesting how much I needed to know, to boil down into a relatively short novel. It's a bit like cooking – reducing and reducing until it comes to some thicker, more viscous, more substantial essence.

The title is about the Kimberley, of course, but as much about the possibility of migrating within ourselves, of finding other country, of moving on.

The story follows the lives of two brothers, and their decision to leave the station and their Old Man and try to make better lives for themselves. It is about the ability to shift within ourselves, but also about the power of recurring family histories.

The boys' ability to change their lives is mirrored by their views on the use of landscape. Should we just go on the old way? Should we diversify and use the land more lightly?

I was pleased that the book was the fiction winner in the WA Premier's Book Awards, of course, but even more thrilled when a health worker in the Kimberley, who didn't know it was my book, said it had helped her understand the culture there a little better.

The next book, *River Country*, is set in the West Kimberley and should be published early next year.

I am writing this at Perth Domestic Airport, and now I hear them calling my flight. I am heading north again, to add to the encyclopaedia that I feel inside.

Editor's note: *Other Country* is published by Allen and Unwin and is available at book shops. The web site www.stephencourfield.com has information about *Other Country*, other titles and other writing. Congratulations are also due to Stephen for being named as Australia's best travel writer in the National Travel Industry Awards in July this year.