



The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do.

Sir William Deane, 1996

Visitors explore the surrounds of Giles' homestead at Springvale 2010
photograph by George Serras
National Museum of Australia

Introduction

In 1878 veteran overlander Alfred Giles, together with 40 men, 12,000 sheep and 2500 cattle, set out from Adelaide in South Australia for the north of what is now the Northern Territory. Twenty months later, the party arrived on the Katherine River where Giles found, as he recorded in his journal, springs of 'beautiful fresh water', 'rich black soil' and a ready supply of building materials. In this promising country, Giles set to work establishing Springvale station. He built a substantial house and food store, started a vegetable garden and soon welcomed his wife, Mary, to their new home.

Giles and his backer, entrepreneur William Browne, were inspired by an idea considered almost self-evident in 19th century Australia, namely that the expansion of the pastoral industry promised economic prosperity. From the early years of British settlement, colonists saw the potential of the continent's grasslands for growing beef, mutton, fibre and skins, and governments soon acted to distribute land to those willing to develop pastoral enterprises. By the 1890s, more than 100 million sheep and 12 million cattle were eating their way across the country, thousands of people

worked in the industry, and wool exports had put Australia on the world economic map.

The history of Australia's pastoral industry, however, is not simply a tale of the inevitable spread of a single new system of land-use across the blank canvas of the continent. Wherever settlers sought to set up stations, they were obliged to respond to local realities, to find a way – if they could – to negotiate with local peoples and adapt to local conditions. At Springvale, these realities proved too much for Giles, as the Jawoyn and Dagoman peoples vigorously defended their country, ticks caused fever in the cattle, grass seeds killed the sheep, and ants ruined food stores. By 1887, Browne was trying to sell Springvale and in 1894 Giles and his family abandoned the station.

Springvale's story and that of Giles' encounter with the region and its first peoples reminds us that Australia's history is not abstract or singular, that our past cannot be understood as the unfolding of any one 'national story'. What emerges from Springvale is a particular tale of human endeavour, located in time and place and marked as much by misunderstanding,