Introduction

The beach looms large in my memories of growing up. My mother lived with her family in Bondi before she married, and several aunts, an uncle and their families still lived there when we were children. Two of my uncles, my childhood heroes, were Bondi lifesavers. We visited often, always going to the beach, joining the swarms that settled on the sand every fine weekend in summer.

Growing up an eager and omnivorous reader, I came to know the Australian books in print at that time: *Dot and the Kangaroo, The Magic Pudding, Seven Little Australians*. Later I graduated to the grimness of *For the Term of His Natural Life*; Henry Lawson's short stories with their brief spurts of bleak, ironic or insane humour leavening their portrayal of the hopelessness of rural poverty; the poetry of 'Banjo' Paterson: 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Clancy of the Overflow'. Although I enjoyed bushwalking and loved the beauty of the bush, the world described in these stories and poems was not the one I and most of the people I knew inhabited.

While Australians are supposed to love the bush, more and more they prefer to live on the coast. The author of *The Coast Dwellers*, Phillip Drew, illustrates a common coastwards migration in the lives of his parents. They moved from Glen Innes, on the New England tablelands, to Coffs Harbour, on the New South Wales north coast, in

1947. The population of Coffs Harbour then was 4787; of Glen Innes, 5453. By 1991, 50 190 people lived in Coffs Harbour, while Glen Innes virtually stagnated at 6130. As Robert Drewe has written, 'Australians make or break romances at the beach, they marry and take honeymoons at the beach, they go on holidays with their children to the beach, and in vast numbers retire by the sea'.[1]

While most of us could recite a verse or two of 'My Country' by Dorothea Mackellar, and sing along, if with some embarrassment, to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda', it seems that we have lacked the *words* with which to express our attachment to the beach. *Images* of the beach are all around us—in advertising, in the newspapers, in newsreels and magazines. When a 'Turn Back the Tide' concert was held on Bondi beach on Good Friday in 1989 to protest against the pollution of Sydney's beaches, it was reported that a quarter of a million people attended—far more than the 50 000 the organisers had hoped for. Given this evidence of the love affair with the beach, it has been difficult to find anyone attempting to *process* the experience of the beach intellectually. In 'Nation and Identity: Bondi' Anne Game commented that 'There has been surprisingly little written by academics on Bondi, and I suspect that it is regarded as a not quite proper object of analysis'.[2] Have Australian intellectuals decided that the beach is too trivial a subject to warrant serious consideration?

One reason for the apparent absence of the beach from what might be called 'high culture' in Australia could lie in collective ignorance of its history. The bush, the landscape, *was* Australia as it presented itself to the first explorers and settlers; but when did the beach become significant? I had a vague memory of a man named Gocher breaking the law by going swimming at Manly in Sydney early this century, with everyone going to the beach after that. But a more determined search for a definitive history of the beach in Australia was fruitless. Documentary evidence relevant to this development—how and why the beach became a prominent part of 'the Australian way of life'—proved to be fragmentary and elusive.

The absence of the original inhabitants' experience of the beach from the historical record, however regrettable, is understandable. The coastal Aboriginal people of south-eastern Australia were the first to be reduced by disease, violence, dispossession and demoralisation in the face of European contact, their way of life destroyed, their stories

apparently lost. What is less explicable is the silence of historians with respect to the place of the beach in Australian life since 1788. Among a recent proliferation of works on Australia's social and cultural history, I expected that some writers would have found it interesting and worthwhile to investigate the development of the relationship between Australian people and their beaches since 1788; for such a study could show us how customs, attitudes and values change in the process of accommodation to a new environment. This might lead us to a deeper understanding of the process of enculturation itself.

Despite its potential significance, one will look in vain for a history of the beach in Australia. Geoffrey Dutton's *Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand: The Myth of the Beach* is an entertaining survey of references to the beach in painting, photography and literature, but in no way is it a systematic history. There are, of course, local histories telling of events and people involving the beach in particular localities, histories of various lifesaving clubs, and collections of facts and anecdotes about the beach, such as Lana Wells's *Sunny Memories: Australians at the Seaside*; but there are no scholarly treatments, generalisations based on a painstaking study of primary source material, or interpretations that seek to link the beach to other important aspects of Australian life. A British historian, John Walton, makes a comment regarding the history of English seaside resorts that could be applied *a fortiori* to the attention paid to the beach by Australian historians: 'The rise of the seaside holiday industry sometimes receives a passing mention in textbooks on British History in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Often these references are wildly inaccurate, and invariably they fail to do justice to the importance of the subject'. Walton writes at the conclusion of his detailed investigation of the English seaside resort that 'Further research . . . is obviously needed, but the situation also demands some ambitious works of well-informed synthesis, even though many of their conclusions will be tentative and interim in nature'.[3]

It has been necessary, then, for me to undertake my own historical study, which, while 'tentative and interim in nature' seeks to achieve a 'well-informed synthesis', linking the changing significance of the beach to other developments and forces in Australian history.

Given that there were significant differences in the history of the beach in different parts of Australia, relating to differences in climate,

social factors and the accessibility of ocean beaches to major population centres, the history of the beach in Sydney is the main point of reference, for several reasons. Sydney was the first European settlement, the place from which British law and custom spread to the other colonies, and with it regulations and attitudes relating to bathing. Laws similar to those in New South Wales were passed in South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and Tasmania;[4] in Queensland also, as a history of its lifesaving movement acknowledges, the early rules governing surf bathing were modelled on those in New South Wales: 'New South Wales must be regarded as the home of surf bathing in Australia . . . it was natural that [public safety measures on the beaches] should emanate from the source of origin of this popular pastime—Sydney'.[5]

Sydney's ocean beaches provided the setting in which aspects of a distinctive beach culture were first recognised and celebrated; the example of Sydney influenced the idea of the beach among Australians in other parts of the continent; and the Surf Life Saving Association, to which the hundreds of surf lifesaving clubs were affiliated, had its headquarters in Sydney, assisted in the development of clubs in other states, and set in place the model adopted by clubs Australia-wide. In Western Australia, for example, the first surf lifesaving club at Cottesloe beach was established in 1909 independently of those on the eastern seaboard; but it sought the advice and adopted the techniques of New South Wales clubs and affiliated with the New South Wales Surf Life Saving Association in the early 1920s.[6] Hence my generalisations are mostly based on primary sources relating to beaches in Sydney; but I have also noted examples, exceptions and differences in other parts of the country.

I have also explored the ways in which writers and artists have interpreted the beach over the period of European settlement; for, just as the facts of the history of the beach show one aspect of a population's adaptation to a new environment, so what David Malouf in his 1998 Boyer lectures called 'that great process of culture', whereby the phenomena of our lived world are translated into symbolism, into consciousness, is an index of adaptation at a deeper level—in the hearts and minds of the people who have become Australian. I have therefore looked at the ways in which the idea of the beach has been treated and imaginatively transformed, and the light this casts on the incorporation of the beach within Australian culture.

Reflecting on the history of the beach and its place in Australian life today, I was engaged by a more general question: how has the beach influenced the development of Australian culture and the sense of our national identity so often a subject for debate? Traits and qualities of character associated with the experience of bush life were used for many years to define what was typically Australian. Could one argue today with equal or greater justification that the experience of living with the beach has shaped Australian culture in hitherto unrecognised or unrecorded ways? My answers to these questions are necessarily speculative; I advance them tentatively in the knowledge that they will provoke disagreement and debate.

It is time that somebody asked them. It seems to me that the place of the beach in Australian life is too prominent, our attachment to it too deep, for its history to remain unrecorded and its deeper significance to be ignored and unexamined.

My use of the term 'the beach' incorporates the constellation of meanings associated with the experience of the beach in Australia. The following section sets the beach in its geographical and physical context, while the final section of this Introduction explores the emotional context in which the beach experience is located.

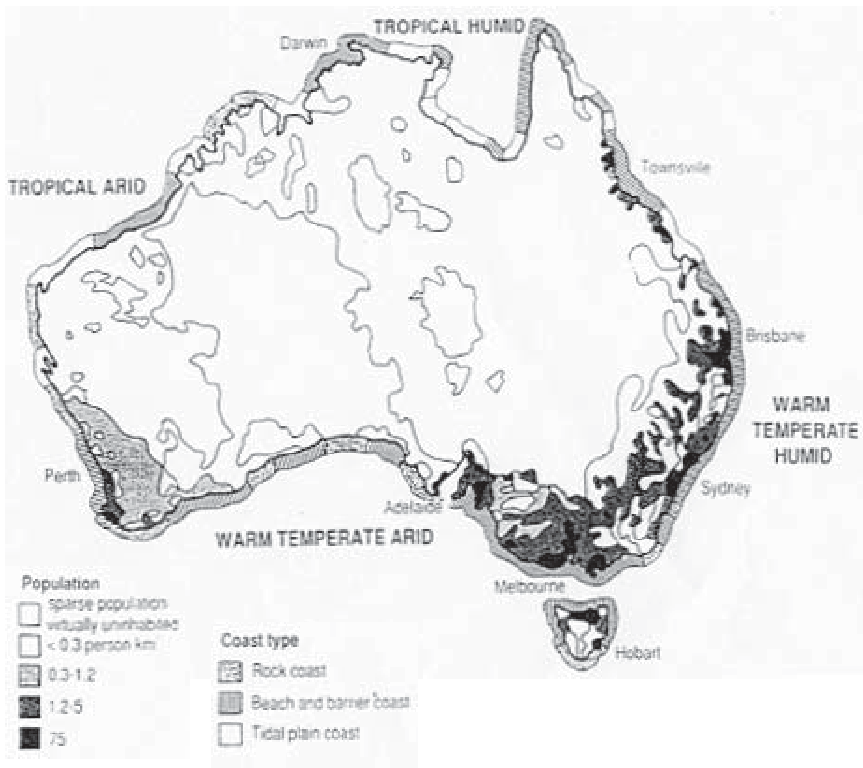
I hope that what I have written resonates with Australian readers and illuminates the significance of experiences we are prone to take for granted. I also hope that it helps readers from different cultural backgrounds to understand us better. For me at least, the search for answers has been an exhilarating and enlightening journey.

Australia's beaches

Australia is an island continent bounded by a coastline about 36 700 km in length, or more than 120 000 km if estuaries and the 1800 islands are included. In a sense, it can be said that Australia is a nation contained within a beach.[7]

The great oceans—Pacific, Indian and Southern—that roll onto the edge of the continent meet a shoreline consisting of three main types of feature: rocks and cliffs; beaches and dunes; and mudflats and tidal plains. The distribution of these features is shown on page 6.[8]

While the headlands enfolding the beaches are composed of rocks millions of years old, the beaches themselves are only about 6500



Australia's beaches.

Source: P. Dale, *Managing Australian Coastlands* (after Thom, 1984); with permission, Pearson Education Australia, publishers.

years old. The coastline at the height of the previous Ice Age about 10 000 years ago was 20 to 60 km offshore, to be gradually submerged as the icecaps melted and the sea rose to its present level.

What is a beach? It is a wave-deposited accumulation of sediment, usually quartz sand grains, together with other minerals and rock, shell and algal fragments, and sometimes cobbles and boulders. Australia is fortunate in that many of its beaches consist of soft sand, often white or pale gold in colour. While the composition of the sand varies from beach to beach, Thomas Keneally's description of the sand on one of Sydney's northern beaches in *Woman of the Inner Sea* could be applied to that on hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other beaches around the Australian coast: 'Sydney sand, that ideal childhood sand—not powdery and bleached, not black and volcanic, not shingly and hostile to bare feet . . . Soft enough for a child to launch himself onto,

shoulder or stomach first, without pain; compact enough for the construction of fantasy'.[9]

The sand of the beach rests on bedrock geology, and the beach itself extends from the upper limit of wave swash (the broken wave spending itself as it spreads over and sinks into the sand, reaching furthest at high tide or in stormy weather) out across the zone of surf to where the waves begin to move the sediment towards the shore.

Although every beach is unique, beaches along one part of the coast may differ in a general way from those in another region. The map divides the continent and its surrounding oceans into climatic regions—temperate/tropical; arid/humid; however, because politically Australia is a single nation, it is often easier to refer to the characteristics of beaches belonging to the various states and the Northern Territory.

Beaches occur along most of the coastline in the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. This is also the part of the continent first settled by Europeans, and has the highest population density. About 60 per cent of the New South Wales coast consists of 721 sandy beaches, ranging from long sweeping beaches up to 26 km long to small, deeply embayed beaches only a few metres in length. The waves of the Pacific Ocean roll virtually unimpeded as surf onto the ocean beaches all the way up the coast to Queensland's southern beaches. The Tasmanian coast, too, mostly consists of beaches, except in the south.

In the tropical waters of North Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, coral reefs form a barrier protecting the coastal beaches from the full force of the ocean waves, so they have no surf to speak of, except in cyclonic weather. Saltwater crocodiles may inhabit these tropical beaches; and at the hottest times of the year large numbers of deadly poisonous box jellyfish are carried towards the beaches, rendering them distinctly uninviting to humans.

Along the south-eastern coast and on the coast of Tasmania the beaches are often short—their average length in New South Wales is just over a kilometre—and contained between rocky outcrops, steep cliffs or headlands. In other places—the Gold Coast of southern Queensland, the Eighty-Mile Beach of north Western Australia, the Ninety-Mile Beach in Victoria, and the Younghusband Peninsula–Lacepede beach in South Australia—they present a long, barely curved

line of sandy dunes to the oceans. Because most of Australia's continental shelf is steep and narrow by world standards, its ocean beaches (where unprotected by reefs) are typically pounded by waves more active and vigorous than those found on many other coastlines—particularly those of Europe.

For historical reasons that are explored in this book, the quintessential Australian beach is a surfing beach—that is, one that faces the open ocean, and where waves build in height before crashing as breakers onto the sand. Sandy beaches without surf are located in sheltered bays and inlets such as Sydney Harbour; sandy stretches of riverbank are also sometimes also thought of as beaches. These places possess attributes of *beachness* to a greater or lesser extent, depending on how closely they approach the qualities of the ocean surf beach.

The appeal of the beach

> *YOU LIVE ONCE BUT YOU SURF FOREVER!*
> —message chalked on the path leading to North Narrabeen beach, 1996

When we go to the beach and cross the threshold from the sand to the sea through the fringing waves, we gain 'access, incomparably literal sensuous access, to that vital level of the self which is continuous with infancy'.[10] As we move into deeper water we relive the experience of immersion, of merging into oneness with the vast undifferentiated matrix. We discover again the joy of play: of dancing through the froth, gliding up the wave face or diving through it (or, at a higher level of grace and skill, riding the wave front as bodysurfer, boardrider or windsurfer). We are enveloped in total sensory stimulation as the cool silky water slides around our bodies, the foam fizzes over the surface of our skin, the roar of the waves fills our ears, the taste of salt in our mouths, as the body of the infant responds with ecstasy to stroking, touching, murmuring, feeding.

And after we live this experience we return to the land, to the sand, where we may lie in drowsy bliss, just as the sated infant sleeps, all tension spent. Or we may engage in different kinds of play: the child's busy engrossment in the building of castles and elaborate sandworks; the adult's walking along the beach and back again, to

nowhere, to no purpose, in contented solitude or easy conversation with a companion; the fisherman's dreaming into the gathering sunrise or the fading dusk. Or we may sit or stand higher up the beach to watch the waves where their rhythmic, repetitive beat, their perpetual advance and retreat, bring a kind of calming reassurance: the sea, always there, though others might vanish, hurt us, abandon us, be unavailable.

The fundamental attraction of the beach lies, then, in its being one of the opportunities that life now and then offers for direct recapturing of

> the joy of a creature who knows time and senses its own separateness, who has become familiar with striving and with the ebb and flow, the melting together and drawing apart, that form the living tie between its fragile individual existence and the hurtful, entrancing surround; it is the joy of a creature who remembers and anticipates less primitive ways of feeling and, suspending what it knows, what it remembers and anticipates, surrenders itself to the melting, flowing moment. So while this joy is not the lost pure euphoria of infancy, it does echo that euphoria clearly enough to offer us episodic, momentary recapture of its flavour . . .[11]

When I read this description by Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, it seemed to me to come close to capturing the emotional and sensory responses associated with enjoyment of the beach. She cited art, religion, and pleasure in nature as examples of forces that might evoke responses of this kind. But in Australia the physical envelopment by moving water and near-total immersion in the 'entrancing surround' experienced at the beach provides a particularly pure example of 'surrender to the melting, flowing moment'. Being-in-the-surf is also qualitatively different from swimming or floating in lake, pool or river because the ever-changing, ever-moving waves, foam, spray and sand accentuate the playful, interactive quality of the experience. In the surf the energy of the body at play synergises with that released by the wave:

> all the energy so carefully gleaned from the winds of the distant storm and hoarded for a thousand miles of ocean crossing is gone, expended in a few wild moments [as the wave breaks]. Because the energy is released so rapidly, the energy density in the surf is actually much higher than in the storm which originally created the waves.[12]

This brings to mind the words of the poet William Blake: 'Energy is the only Life, and is from the Body . . . Energy is Eternal Delight'.[13] It is during these playful moments that we are most true to ourselves, according to Freud: 'Man is only completely a man when he plays'.[14] And Freud is not alone in identifying play as an essential human activity, the potential of which is often perverted or destroyed by civilisation. The Christian theologian, Jacob Boehme, wrote that

> As God plays with the time of this outward world, so also should the inward divine man play with the outward in the revealed wonders of God in this world, and open the Divine Wisdom in all creatures, each according to its property. Adam fell when this play became serious business.[15]

The intrinsic eroticism of beach activity is manifest in its playfulness. Yet the beach is not pure, unalloyed joy: that allusion to the '*hurtful*, entrancing surround' acknowledges the ambivalence that is inescapably part of human experience. At the beach we know our helplessness when waves dump us or the rip drags us this way or that. We feel our own weakness in the grip of that overpowering strength; mingled with our joy is a fear of the perils that lurk in the opaque depths—the sharks, the biting and stinging creatures, the unimaginable. Thus awareness of the potential for danger as well as delight is always with us; but as long as it remains 'an undercurrent', the intensification of sensory arousal associated with this awareness may actually increase our pleasure.

Testimony to this pleasure is not hard to find:

> That crowded beach [Bondi] had a sound, a roar of excitement. You could say it was joy . . .[16]

> I can remember one crystalline morning when nothing seemed more beautiful than the look, the sound and the smell of the green and white Pacific. I launched my board onto that swaying transparency, paddled it over the rainbow spray and the bucking waves singing 'shenandoah' at the top of my voice and certain that nothing anywhere in the world could match this joy.[17]

and

> There is nowhere else I'd rather be, nothing else I would prefer to be doing. I am at the beach looking west with the continent behind me as the sun tracks down to the sea. I have my bearings.[18]

Some would disparage the delight so intensely felt by these beachgoers as a pleasant but essentially trivial diversion from the serious business of life; but Dinnerstein is emphatic that such joy is of vital importance. It supplements the other compensations that life offers and that help to assuage our basic, universal and inconsolable grief—a grief which arises, first, from separation from the mother and consequent loss of the infant illusion of being all-powerful; and later, from the realisation that we must die. These other compensations are *history-making*—the world's pool of 'memorable event, communicable insight, teachable technique, durable achievement'; and *work*, 'the quest for mastery, competence, enterprise, in place of the old joy of passive, effortless wish-fulfilment'.[19]

To the extent we strive to shut out from our minds and hearts the certain prospect of death, trying to act as if we were immortal, we are unable to live in the present and to surrender ourselves to whatever pleasure life can offer us. It is crucial for our psychological health and wholeness to for us to embrace opportunities for enjoyment of the moment—opportunities of which the beach provides, in Australia, a readily accessible example.

The beach therefore holds potent meaning for human beings irrespective of culture, since it invites us to relive the 'early carnal joy' experienced in infancy. This helps to explain why the appeal of the beach is so fundamental. In many countries practical considerations of climate, geography, history, accessibility of the ocean and cultural inhibitions limit, discourage or prevent the expression of this attraction; but in Australia a combination of favourable climate, geography, accessibility, and—eventually—history and culture, have combined to enhance the ability and the inclination of Australians to respond to the lure of the beach.

Today the beaches are freely available for our enjoyment. While this freedom is now taken for granted, it has not always been the case. The reasons stretch back to the beginnings of settlement and were strongly influenced by our European inheritance, which affected perceptions of the beach even before British settlement.