

# “Nuclear Tourism” in Australia: The Maralinga Venture, Relic of Britain’s Nuclear Tests

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*“I just want back my mother. I want back my land, too. Clean.”* Dr. Archie Barton, member of the Tjarutja people, Maralinga, to Australian Prime Minister John Howard, *The Age*, May 11, 2003

The ghoulish and the ghastly always find form in the tourist venture. Human beings do get rather off on the issue of cruelty, despite prohibiting its extreme forms in legal codes and conventions. If something as horrifying as the Holocaust or Berlin Wall border guards can be the subject of necessary, museum experience, then it should come as no surprise that nuclear tourism should be equally be relevant.

Maralinga, a site located in south-western South Australia, presents a very different opportunity. There are no onsite uniforms – as yet; but there are slabs and structures. It was at Maralinga that residents were affected by Britain’s nuclear program conducted in the 1950s and 1960s. In terms of its politics and secrecy, it was dirtier and more ruthless than most. In 2009, the village and surrounding sites in Maralinga were handed back to the Maralinga-Tjarutja people. But access had been restricted. Much of this was overlooked in the ceremony leading to formalised opening to Site 400.

Maralinga-Tjarutja general Manager Richard Preece saw prospects. “We’re going to set up bus tours so people can be taken around by Robin (local caretaker), who is a walking encyclopaedia of Maralinga.”[1] Well, there was still some contamination, but some of the structures “are still there and there’s a huge airstrip.”

In August 1954, the Australian Cabinet came to the conclusion that the British could establish a permanent testing ground at Maralinga. This was less colonial chin wagging than good old dictation by mother and nurse. Mother Britannia was in trouble, given her slipping down the world atomic rankings before the US and Soviet Union.

The United Kingdom, having captured the atomic and hydrogen bug, was determined to pursue a program of experimentation across the Pacific and Australia. British testing staff, and residents in the area, became recipients of that benignly termed product called “fall out”, stemming from such operations as Operation Buffalo (1956) and Operation Antler (1957).

Almost 600 minor trials – a kind of window into the potential “tactical” use of nuclear weapons – were conducted for the purpose of gathering effect and yield, resulting in the contamination of the area by some 830 tons of debris filled with 24,400 grams of

plutonium. The area still boasts pits filled with cobalt-60 and plutonium. All in all, some twelve atomic weapons were exploded on Australian soil, at Maralinga, Emu Field and Monte Bello Islands.

According to some participants involved in the site testing, personnel were ordered to engage the dust at ground zero soon after the blasts. The rationale, according to the British line, was testing the effect of radiation on clothing. All of this pointed to a thesis that has come to form the basis of various works, including Frank Walker's *Maralinga* (2014). Some 16,000 Australian personnel were exposed. Pilots of the Royal Australian Air Force were given orders to fly into the climbing radioactive clouds. Australians and British subjects had become lab rats for Queen and country.

The entire conduct of the Maralinga programs has fallen foul of various standards. On the issue of health, they rank appallingly. On the issue of law, they rank poorly – a 600 page report by J.K. Symonds, formerly of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission, suggested that the Australian government knew that British experiments in the early 1960s, and the late 1950s contravened a moratorium on nuclear tests made on October 31, 1958 at Geneva. Britain's official historian on the subject, Lorna Arnold, cites instructions that were sent to Maralinga that "all firings involving radioactive materials must cease by midnight on October 31." [2]

What happened was a neat, if fiendish experiment in bureaucratic cosmetics. Chief scientist Sir William Penney was pleased to inform the British Foreign Office of the plan. "We are changing the name in order to prevent the possible interpretation that they are very small nuclear explosions." Miraculously, the experiments became "assessment tests". By 1959, they had morphed into "the Maralinga Experimental Program". Vicious Frankenstein had become innocuous and benevolent.

There were stages of resistance, notably to the so called Vixen B program between 1960 and 1963 which countenanced the explosion of a total nuclear weapon. The point, however, was fundamentally paternalistic: Australia, the handmaiden to British wishes, was being kept out of the loop even as it was being used as a laboratory. In Symonds' words, "There were curt exchanges between the UK and the Australian Governments and their authorities on whether Australia would accept that certain types of trials would take place at Maralinga" (*Canberra Times*, 24 Jul, 1985).

Material to the Australian on the ground proved scanty. The briefings were insufficient. In Symonds' own words, Australian officials were "being kept too much at a distance from the real nature of the proposed tests." Protests noted by such individuals as Professor Ernest Titterton of the Australian Weapons Tests Safety Committee were quashed. A conservative Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies had absolutely no desire on derailing the British experiment. In 1993, Ian Anderson would claim in the *Scientific American* that, "Britain knew in the 1960s that radioactivity at its former nuclear test site in Australia was worse than first thought. But it did not tell the Australians." [3]

In the 1980s, the Royal Commission into British nuclear tests into Australia, commonly termed the McClelland Royal Commission, found various instances cultural and administrative blindness on the part of participants in the projects. [4] These tended to display the ignorance of children at a neglectful parent: why did you know tell me about the birds and the bees till it was too late?

The Commission records instances of barefooted Aboriginals walking on contaminated ground and some camping in radioactive craters; instances of drifting radioactive cloud cited by alarmed officials; and the persistent presence of radioactive fragments. It also notes the bare views of such individuals as Air Task Force Commander Air Vice-Marshal "Paddy" Menaul. Monitoring the movements of Aboriginal residents in the area was deemed unnecessary. "They sleep most afternoons." For officialdom, Australian aboriginals remained legal, and physical, absentees. Questioners of this narrative were whipped into line.

Such blindness would continue to the British courts, with the UK Supreme Court ruling that a class action involving 1,000 British veterans could not succeed on the basis that their claims, filed 60 years after the events, could not be linked with clear certainty to their illness.[5]

Efforts to instigate a clean-up have been deemed clumsy and ineffective. One doesn't remove plutonium with an air brush and cheery optimism. All in all, there have been four attempts, with 100 square kilometres still deemed contaminated "above the clean-up criteria" (ABC, Nov 5). The bad habits continue. Even Preece could suggest, without even lapsing into conscious gallows humour, that tourists could still be "escorted" and receive the genuine Maralinga flavour. A truly different form of tourism, if ever there was one.

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## Notes

- [1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-05/traditional-owners-given-maralinga-unrestricted-access/5865048>
- [2] <http://johnkeane.net/47/topics-of-interest/maralingas-afterlife>
- [3] <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg13818772.700-britains-dirty-deeds-at-maralinga-fresh-evidence-suggests-that-britain-knew-in-the-1960s-that-radioactivity-at-its-former-nuclear-test-site-in-australia-was-worse-than-first-thought-but-it-did-not-tell-the-australians-.html>
- [4] [http://www.industry.gov.au/resource/Documents/radioactive\\_waste/RoyalCommissioninToBritishNucleartestsinAustralia.pdf](http://www.industry.gov.au/resource/Documents/radioactive_waste/RoyalCommissioninToBritishNucleartestsinAustralia.pdf)
- [5] <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2009/1225.html>

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