

# ISSUES OF OUR TIME

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## Mutitjulu

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The hotel was like a giant oasis in the middle of a harsh, barren land. The lights that flickered on and off, shining through the curtains of the hotel rooms, made the bulky building shimmer like a mirage. It seemed almost incongruous; this sprawling resort surrounded by the vast, empty desert.

Sitting in the air-conditioned room and looking out on to the bulk of the mightiest rock in the world sent a thrill through George. He felt small and insignificant being so close to something that had endured for many centuries and would endure for many more. When he had first arrived, he was immediately struck by the quiet majesty of the Aboriginal culture; their myths and legends, their artwork and the other aspects of their life. However, the incident earlier in the day did nothing but chill him.

As he drove towards the sleeping form of the giant rock, George felt an inner sense of calm. It was the silent image of the rock that caused him to feel an unusual stillness and quiet. It was visible from the road and never out of sight. An improbable presence commanding awe. The silence that filled the air was broken only by the humming of his engine. In the distance, to his right, silhouetted against the morning sky, were the Olgas. They looked like humped old women, huddled together to preserve some warmth. George could attest to the need for warmth in the Olgas — they formed a series of natural wind tunnels that funnelled cold wind on to the brave visitor.

By the side of the road, as he drove towards the sleeping giant that was Uluru, was an Aboriginal man with his child. Their car, a battered Toyota utility, was out of petrol and was splayed awkwardly in the margin of the road and the desert. Seeing them stranded he had pulled over to offer his help, be it a phone call or a lift back to a service station. The man moved on to the road and signalled for George to stop. He explained that his car had run out of fuel, stranding him and his young son. He asked if he could siphon off some of George's, just enough to get him a few kilometres down the Sturt Highway, back to a service station. Eager to aid them, George popped the lid of his petrol tank and watched the man produce a length of hose. However, due to the new design of the fuel tanks, which prevents the hose reaching the petrol, he was unsuccessful. After observing the small fire the father had set up for his son, George offered to drive back to the hotel complex (a 10-minute drive) to get them some petrol.

Upon his return, with a loaded jerry-can of petrol, all traces of the fire were gone. The boy was strapped into the dusty Toyota and the man was waiting for his fuel. He did not offer to pay for the petrol and George did not ask. He did, however, ask if he could provide any further assistance. The man pointed up the road and asked George to inform his friends, a few hundred metres up the road and waiting in their car, that he was ready to leave. Not until he had conveyed this request and was in the shadow of the rock did he realise that there was something wrong.

Questions began to bombard his mind — Why didn't the man's friends come to his aid? Why were they waiting for him a short distance away? Had George done the wrong thing? As he reached the base of the rock he parked his car in the nearby carpark. Getting out, he noticed a large sign that explained the Indigenous people's ownership of the rock, its sacredness and their request that visitors abstain from climbing it. George looked up and noticed that the request had gone unheeded. The rock was covered in moving figures that resembled ants, or as the Mutitjulu people referred to them — Minga. Heading towards the Mutitjulu walk he began to relax and all thoughts of his earlier

encounter left his mind. The Mutitjulu waterhole, home of the ancestral water snake Wanampi, was a peaceful place — untouched by modern troubles.

While George was standing by the still waters he marvelled at the contrast. The modern Aboriginal tribes were divided and split by the terrible tragedies which befell them. Compared to the traditions and lore handed down, such as the tale of Liru and Kuniya — an ancient story of Uluru — the present situation made the Aborigines seem like a broken people. Cave paintings adorned the walls of the cramped overhang and ancient fire ashes (or more recent ones, unfortunately) coated the floor. The ancient wonders of this place made him catch his breath in amazement. The gentle sound of the wind as it swirled through the many holes in the rock, as well as the trees that guarded the path, soothed and calmed his mind. George finally stopped thinking and simply allowed the soothing winds and sounds of an ancient people to wash over him.



**Thomas Sellitto** wrote this essay in 2007 when he was in Year 11 at Trinity Grammar School, Kew, Victoria.