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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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Southeast Asia

Dr. Shelly Browning is an Institute Fellow studying Australian Aboriginal people through their traditional medicine — and, therefore, the societies and underpinnings of Australia itself.

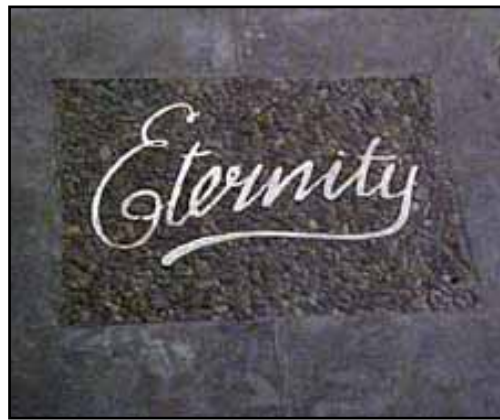
for all....Eternity

By Shelly R. Browning

JULY/AUGUST 2001

Sydney. Australia's global city.¹ Arguably one of the most recognizable urban areas within the Southern Hemisphere. Its vibrant, dazzling landmarks compose one of the most spectacular and iconic harbors of the world. It is so seemingly picture-postcard-perfect, one can easily become blinded by the whiteness of it all — the white shells of the Sydney Opera House, the white sands of Sydney's beloved beaches and, of course, the white-collars coursing through the veins of its rich and lively commercial center.

It should have come as no surprise, then, that a conversation within its Castlereagh CBD (Central Business District) would proceed as follows:



Eternity Engraved in the City of Sydney....

MYSELF: I'm here to appreciate Aborigines.

COLIN (THE WHITE-COLLAR CAUCASIAN INTERNATIONAL BANKER): Good Luck! You're going to need it. You don't look very Aboriginal. And given that fact, you can appreciate them for all eternity, and still not understand those people. Mixing with them is like mixing oil with water.

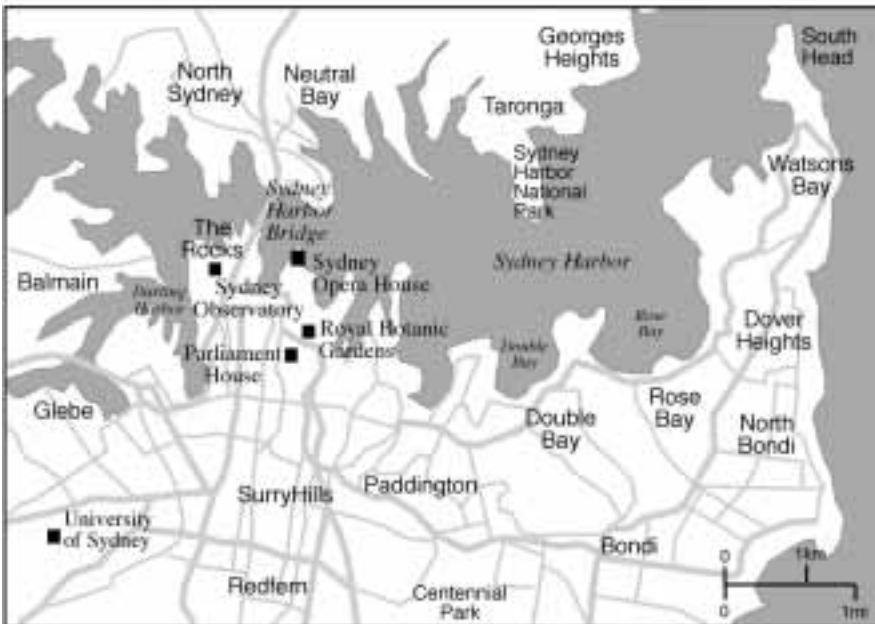
Colin's remarks stung my sense of sensibility. His words audibly reverberated in an almost painful manner — all in the manner of an ambulance's siren which at that very moment of these contemplations, coursed down Sydney's Castlereagh Street:

"...appreciate for all Eternity....still not understand THOSE PEOPLE."

Granted, I had heard words like this before. This wasn't anything new. And frankly, I told him, I appreciated his forthrightness — his frankness on this subject matter. At least he would converse about his country's Aborigines. It was just that his otherwise sunny Australian disposition would briefly darken when we spoke of my forays into the world of Aboriginal Australians.

Thus far, there appears to be no topic more sensitive in Australia than things Aboriginal. For a country dedicated to the pursuit of equality and democracy, Aboriginal issues remain a painful, poignant apophysis within the body of this country. I have yet to detect any other conversational field so filled with landmines of responses. Awkward silences, downcast eyes, retractive body poses — all gen-

¹ Demographers estimate that in October 1998, Sydney's population passed the 4 million mark. Melbourne, Sydney's Southern sibling city, with a population that until recently rivaled that of Sydney, is not expected to reach four million until 2015, as Australia's population shifts northwards. Clearly, Sydney has established its national dominance as Australia's population centre.



their final exam. Their exam to pass my course involved going out somewhere in Sydney, finding an Aborigine, initiating a conversation with such an individual, and writing a paper on the experience of this encounter.”

I asked about the contents of those papers. “You would be amazed”, she said. “The majority of their writings revealed sentiments of astonishment. The white Australians found a wealth of intelligence, perception and wisdom in what they considered the dark [or black?] side of this country. Their preconceived notions of Aborigines as stupid, primitive, derelicts flew right out the window once they actually took the time to get to know their country’s first people”.

Many can — and choose to — seamlessly sail through the white waters of Australia without ever mixing with the black, “oily” individuals of its Aboriginal population. But they do exist. But where, you might ask, are Aborigines in Sydney?

Try, for example, and ironically enough — Blacktown — and Redfern. No part of urban Australia is more closely identified with Aborigines than these two areas and increasingly with a tiny portion of them: a cluster of streets that is the most famous, or perhaps infamous. This neighborhood, just a few kilometers from Sydney’s glorious harbor, is collectively known as The Block. It’s a cooperative — or a commune created by Aborigines and the government after World War II. Regularly featured on television and in the press, it is widely portrayed as a centre of crime, poverty and despair.

erally ensue as soon as I delicately begin a discourse about any thing Aboriginal.

Conversely, it is relatively easy to live within Australia’s urban areas without ever “getting to know Aborigines”. Elizabeth, a forward-thinking Australian of British heritage and a Professor of English remarked that the topic of Aboriginal affairs was broached unintentionally in her Sydney University class. She was astounded to discover that none of her 30 nonindigenous students had — within the courses of their lives — experienced an encounter with an Australian Aborigine. Ever.

“So”, she told me, with emphasis, “I restructured

Some Aborigines considered The Block their space. These folks viewed this area as a place that offered continuity with the past. It was a nuclear meeting place for Aborigines coming to the city, thus creating a much-maligned “black capital” of Australia, where a defined area of urban Aboriginal land had been carved for them.

Of course, reality and my perceptions of it are all quite complex; not all Aborigines (such as my friend Lucky) are satisfied with their housing and home situation within this urban setting. The most recent 1996 survey suggested that one-fourth of the Aboriginal residents of this area would choose to stay of their own volition; two-thirds of the others would seek to live elsewhere in Sydney; and the re-

Is Lucky Lucky?

Although it is not possible to move to the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) in Redfern, I did camp out there during my time in Sydney. Eventually I was able to develop a relationship — luckily enough — with Lucky. An Aboriginal fellow originally from the Northern Territory Region, he arrived in Sydney “many, many moons ago”. (He did not know how long he had been in Redfern outside Sydney. Years perhaps?)

He explained that all sense of time was meaningless to him and many of his people. Concepts such as “forever”, “long time” and “Eternity” seemed to take precedence in our connective conversations. These precepts combined with an affinity for alcohol led him to take me throughout a repetitively rambling and roundabout route of his life.

When queried, he reported no resistance on his roundup from the parks of Sydney — where he lived after initially making his journey (on foot, no less) from the long distance of the Northern Territory. He had always wanted to see Sydney. And after some time, police arrested him. Following incarceration for several months, he was eventually deposited in the housing project in The



Lucky “licking the liquor” at The Block . Note the Sydney skyline in the background and the fact that Lucky himself frames graffiti art acknowledging Aboriginal sentiments: “40,000 Years Is a Long, Long Time.... 40,000 Years Still on My Mind...”

Block. This is where he’s lived “ever since”.

He reports he loves his alcohol. He purchases it whenever he receives any money from the government. “It [the alcohol] brings me such a sense of peace. You white fellas just don’t understand...”

When asked about his current living situation, he clearly stated that he did not wish “to think about it”. His alcohol consumption made this task unimaginably easier. □

maining one-third wanted to leave Sydney altogether.

Given the social status of this Aboriginal urban area and recent Olympic aspirations for the gentrification of Sydney, (especially an area so close to the heart of the city) the city fathers have recently begun relocating The Block population throughout distant western outlying regions of Sydney.

Aboriginal inhabitants who wanted to stay within their “block” believed that “they’re breaking up our tribe.” As Aboriginal singer Archie Roach observed, “It [The Block] seemed to me like the last bastion, the last threshold. It was a place you could go, where you knew you had a place; now there doesn’t seem to be anywhere.”

If this evolution of Aboriginal society in urban

Sydney is dispiriting due to its fragmentation and resettlement of this community, it nonetheless has links to the wider history of Aborigines in Australia and early processes of marginalisation, dispossession and dispersal.

The first human inhabitants of the Sydney region were Aboriginal people residing here tens of thousands of years (believed 40,000 - 60,000) prior to the arrival of the British First Fleet in 1788 (the “First Fleeters”). It is roughly estimated that well over 1,000 Aborigines lived in the Sydney Harbor area itself.

Inevitable clashes of culture and a disease believed to be smallpox resulted in the loss of approximately 90 percent of this original Harbor Aboriginal population.² Aboriginal lack-of-warfare mentality and lack of viral-immune systems failed to resist this decimation of their

² Although the source of the supposed smallpox has never been identified, it has recently been revealed (Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales, Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney, 1988) that this disease may have been intentionally introduced into the Aboriginal population to reduce their numbers, minimize conflict and make British settlement easier. The local population had no resistance, and the disease had a dramatic impact: bodies were observed floating in the Sydney Harbor and left to decay in rock shelters along the shores of this area.

Advancing Australia (and Aborigines?)



Sadie "saluting" Aboriginal Anthems...? Sadie (an Aboriginal friend at The Block) walks between the graffiti art consisting of a portion of the Aboriginal flag (on left) and an artist's rendition of "Aboriginal Advance Australia":

"Advance Australians of all colour for not only are we young & free, we are ancient and oppressed. Let's recognize the bounty of knowledge the world's oldest continuous culture has to offer the new young & free. Recognition Now of past rights & wrongs will allow us to right the wrong."

The National Anthem of Australia consists of the tune,
"Advance Australia Fair":

Australians all let us rejoice,
For we are young and free,
We've golden soil and wealth for toil;
Our home is girt by sea;
Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare,
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia Fair
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross
We'll toil with hearts and hands;
To make this Commonwealth of ours
Renowned of all the lands;
For those who've come across the seas
We've boundless plains to share:
With courage let us all combine
To Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful Strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Is [Advancing] Australia Fair?

population. Those Aborigines who did survive were progressively pushed inland or removed and dispersed.

Early British colonizers were convinced by missionaries that the best way to "civilize, Christianise and educate" remaining young Aborigines was to remove these children from the influence of their parents and place them in institutions for redistribution. Beginning in Sydney in 1814, this process of removing Aboriginal children from their parents was to continue in various forms for almost 150 years.

Admittedly, I find this all quite complicated and bewildering. Are they statistical phantoms and invisible people — these Sydney Aborigines? Are things so very black and white here? It would be facile for a fresh-faced foreigner like myself to quickly begin delineating judgments or boundary lines within this country — this city — based on these black- and-white issues and my black-and-white encounters.

However, I recognize that there's much more here than meets the eye. There's a great deal going on and I've only begun to touch the surface of very deep country, its complex culture, history and attitudinal milieu. Are there two types of people in Sydney — in Australia — embodying black and white polarities?

From a scientific perspective, I am well aware of the hydrophilic properties of water and the hydrophobic properties of oil. The two do not mix well. And upon repeated reflection of white-collared Colin's remarks, I became increasingly anxious. What could possibly be written to convey and justifiably portray these seemingly unjust water and "oil" conundrums?

Is there any hope or healing? Is there anything at all that could occur to reconcile — or even mix — these color and cultural diversities?

And while walking past Sydney's

Town Hall, I was stung again — but this time by the splendor of a sudden thought:

I was reminded of Sydney's Arthur Stace.

Born in 1885 in Redfern, the fifth child of Mauritian immigrant parents, Arthur Stace was raised in desperate poverty. At the age of 12 he was made a child of the state. After the deaths of his siblings via prostitution and crime, Stace himself turned to petty thievery, drifting into unemployment and alcoholism. The fate of his brothers and sisters seem soon to be his own.

Then it's reported that something remarkable occurred. In 1930 while lying in a street, Stace overheard a speech that changed his life. Part of the text of the Sydney street speech (given by a traveling minister) was as follows:

"Eternity — what a remarkable uplifting, glorified word.....Eternity, Eternity. Oh that I could shout and sound Eternity all over the streets of Sydney."

According to Stace's own account he became imme-

diately inspired and, though barely literate, found that he could now write this one word — Eternity — in beautiful copperplate handwriting with a piece of chalk opportunely found in his pocket.

He took it upon himself to write this word throughout the streets of Sydney — at night continuously for some 40 years producing over 500,000 repetitions of his inspirational motto. Some Sydneysiders can still recall the experience of coming across Stace's grand and glorious "word work" in their perambulations of the city's streets. Some were reportedly inspired.

I was one such individual.

As I delve into the history of this city, this place, this country, I have discovered more than I imagined possible. Stories exist untold. And as such, many complexities reveal themselves to those willing to listen and to look. Perhaps... it's misleading to suppose there's a neat dividing (life)line between black and white. Indeed, isn't life's rich palette full of color that encom-

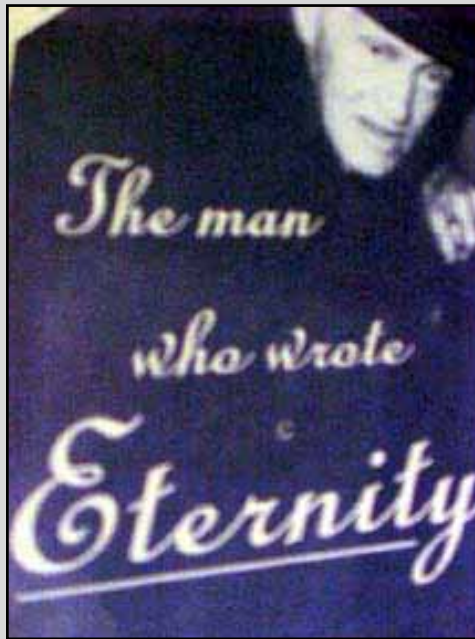
That Shy Mysterious Poet...

Considered a city celebrity, Arthur Stace was designated as an "Australian poet scribe" for his graffiti art throughout Sydney.³ In a sense, he was a wanderer writing and rewriting his signature wish on the streets of Sydney in a physical journey that never ended but only repeated itself.

And much like those of the Aborigines, it was during my own wanderings that I came upon a legacy — Stace's legacy — engraved in stone outside Sydney's Town Hall. (See photo, page 1)

While admiring Eternity, I discovered Albert who works at Sydney's Town Hall. While speaking within to him about Stace's work, he excitedly informed me he knew Arthur Stace.

"I was his neighbor when I was much younger", Albert said. I always used to see "Eternity" written at the corner of two streets. He was very clever. Arthur



Arthur Stace (1885-1967)

Stace knew that if he put his chalk writing at the corner of an intersection of two streets, parties on both streets would see it." Albert straddled an imaginary street with his feet and demonstrated for me how Stace's writings appeared.

"I never knew it was he [Stace] who went around Sydney doing this. He would work all night writing this — but nobody knew. After Arthur Stace's death, I was shocked to discover it was him writing! When I knew him, he was older and looked dignified and mysterious. He always wore black with a bolero-type hat and one of those old-timey chain watches attached to his vest. Amazing, eh?"

I discern many similarities amongst Stace, Australian Aborigines and myself. Graffiti tend to be produced by people who don't always travel in straight lines but exhibit movements of a different kind. Although from diverse backgrounds, perhaps Stace, Aborigines — and myself — are not so different after all...

³ Stace has been the subject of Australian documentaries, commentaries, novels, paintings and poems. For further information, see Lawrence Johnston's (award-winning) documentary, Dorothy Hewett's novel, Martin Sharp's paintings and Douglas Stewart and Anthony Lawrences' poems.

passes — and even mixes — black and white?

Much like his understated Aboriginal counterparts, Arthur Stace was a person of the dark, black hours of Sydney. Considered a derelict and drunk, he nevertheless had an impact upon the Sydney psyche. He produced his creations subtly, unobtrusively — but persistently. And via sheer perseverance of this one man, a message was spread throughout — and into — the heart of Sydney.

On the eve of 31 December 1999, a fabulous display of fireworks was released over Sydney's Harbor Bridge in preparation for the impending world's attention of the 2000 Olympic Games. The grand finale of this spectacle closed with the word "Eternity" engraved in fireworks within the bridge in tribute to a man, his city and his nation. "If the night — Sydney's night that is — belonged to a person it had to be Arthur Stace, the enigmatic Sydneysider who confounded, delighted and perplexed the city for half a century with a piece of chalk and a remarkable commitment."⁴

A message for the millennium for Sydney?

I stood late last night contemplating Australian ebony and ivory controversies along Writer's Walk — a space that provides a vantage view of both the gleaming white

Sydney Opera House and the matte black Sydney Harbor Bridge. I recalled Colin, Elisabeth, Lucky, Sadie, Albert, Arthur Stace and all the beautiful Australians I have encountered thus far. I also pondered Eternity and how this single word had echoed through many of my Sydney encounters and conversations. And I smiled.

Because just as Sydney's Harbor Bridge connects two facets of Sydney's metropolis, perhaps Sydney (and Australia) can bridge its black and white, East and West, and water and "oil".

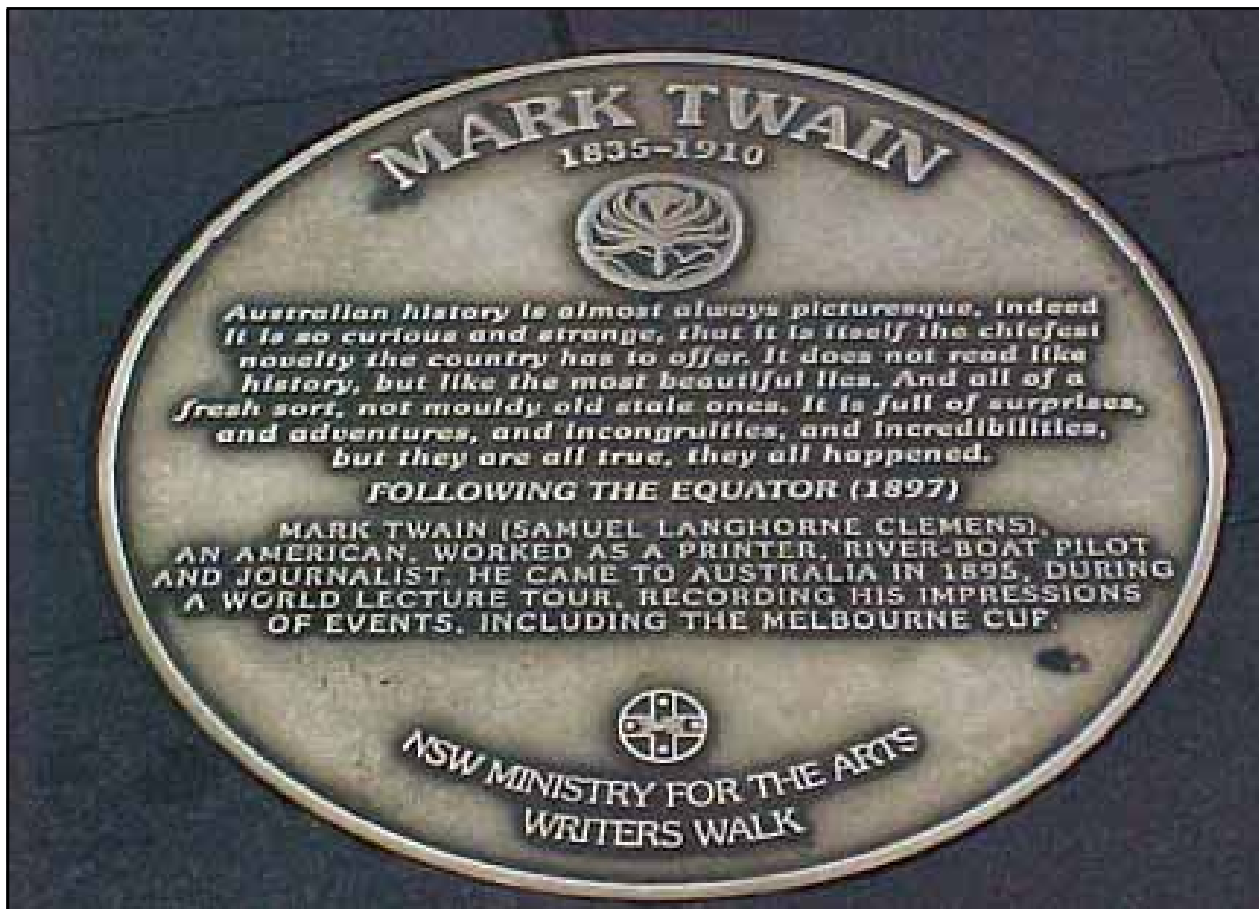
Hope reigns supreme for Sydney, for Australia, her countrymen, for myself, for everyone and for all....Eternity. □

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⁴ "Sydney's Spectacle..." *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, 1 January 2000

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FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine doctoral candidate and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of *Italo/Latino machismo*. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

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