



The
University
of Sydney



Sydney Sawyer Seminar

Friday, 27th March, 2009

Session Two Report

The Impact of the Antipodes on Ecological Thought: Landscape, Evolution, and Sustainability

Convenor: Iain McCalman

Julia Horne
'Landscape and Wonder'

Peter Denney
'Picturesque Farming: The Sound of 'Happy Britannia' in Early Australia'

Martin Thomas
'Cross-Cultural Exchange in Arnhem Land: The Legacy of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition'

Richard Waterhouse
'Taming the 'Wastelands': the dream of the yeoman in Australian history'



The first half of our session, with papers by Dr Julia Horne, University Historian, and Dr Peter Denney, Sawyer Postdoctoral Fellow, explored distinctive as well as common elements within the interpretation of Australian and northern hemisphere landscape traditions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These encompassed a variety of forms of representation, including picturesque painting, poetry, postcards, illustration, posters, photography, and soundscapes.

Julia Horne argued for the fascinating emergence in Australian popular thought of the category of 'natural wonder' — such as cataracts, cave formations, and types of local fauna — which seemed to combine both picturesque aesthetic conceptions and natural science evidences. Both she and many members of the audience in question time keenly interrogated this idea. It seemed to blend two traditions that have become markedly polarized in formal northern hemisphere analyses: Romantic and sublime concepts of the imaginative impact of certain types of aesthetic object on the human psyche and the emergence of geomorphological laws in the wake of Charles Lyell, interpreting the landscape as the product of continuous, often invisible, natural forces discoverable by empirical measurement. Interestingly, the idea of the natural wonder could lead in practice to both progressive and regressive ecological policies.

Peter Denney advanced what he called an early and provisional application to European Australia of a theory developed in his earlier work on eighteenth-century Britain. He showed how the sound of labour and human activity — celebrated by landscape poets such as James Thomson and early naïve landscape paintings — was purged from pictorial landscape around the mid-eighteenth-century, as theories of the picturesque became dominant. The energy and noise of human recreation and work, denoting the civilizing of nature, was replaced with an aesthetic that sought as far as possible to

minimize noise in favour of a landscape of soundless nature. However, when applied to Australia and the Pacific this last tradition found itself in paradoxical tension. The newly 'discovered' Australian landscape was viewed as empty of the sounds and signs of man-made labour, which were thought to denote European civilization in the face of the savage void. Denney admitted that he had not yet tried to see how the differing conceptions of Atlantic and Pacific birdsong — the former represented as gentle and melodious, the latter as harsh and discordant — would map onto this incipient southern landscape tradition.

After the tea break, Iain McCalman showed three short clips from films made in collaboration with observational film-maker Kim McKenzie of the Australian National University. These clips were designed to introduce and accompany some of the themes to be canvassed in Martin Thomas's talk. The first two, 'Fragments of the Owl's Egg' and 'In the Footsteps of the Old People', explored aspects of the imperiled cultural and ecological heritage of the Western Arnhem Land Plateau, which has become seriously degraded since it lost the knowledge and land management practices of its original indigenous inhabitants. The film clips showed how the elderly painter and land custodian Bardayal Nadjamerrek has returned to his country to teach a small collection of young Aboriginal people and European scientists the land management techniques used by his people for thousands of years. The other clip, from 'Reading the Book of the Rocks', used the story and symbol of the Philosophers' Range — nine mountains named after the dominant geologists of mid-Victorian England — to show how northern hemisphere scientific ideas had early been applied to demonstrate the massive changes that glacial ice had wrought in the Tasmanian landscape, presaging the crisis of climate change that confronts us again today.

Martin Thomas also some showed clips from the same area, featuring Bardayal Nadjamerrek and linguist Murray Garde. However, his much larger purpose was to explore the extraordinary impact that the 1948 Mountford Expedition to Arnhem Land exerted not only on Australian conceptions of Indigenous life but also on global anthropology, especially when taken up by the celebrated modern Chicago anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. Martin was concerned particularly to explore the question of whether and how the Australian case had functioned as a type of living laboratory for scientists and ethnographers more accustomed to controlled laboratory work. He showed how the original aims and momentum of the expedition changed and how the work done there shaped revised conceptions of hunter-gather life, despite the fact that western food patterns had to some extent already changed the meaning of the hunter-gatherer category.

In the final paper Richard Waterhouse undertook a searching analysis of the historiography of European land settlement ideas and policies. In particular he noted how the idealized conception of the yeoman farmer had been taken up by Australian historians, irrespective of continual evidence throwing doubt on its application both in theory and practice. Using a large variety of examples, ranging from the 1861 land laws to the soldier settlements after both World Wars, he showed that the yeoman idea had been mobilized only when politically and socially convenient. Its application had been 'flexible' and varied in the extreme. Such imported British ideas had continually warred with the need for, and ability to grab, much larger land holdings within the climatic and environmental circumstances of Australia. He also showed how yeoman and other European ideals had been myopic in the presence of powerful evidence of Indigenous land management processes. This revisionist, pungent and often witty paper brought the proceedings of the seminar to a nice close.

Iain McCalman