

Sheila Collingwood-Whittick

WAYS OF SEEING 'COUNTRY': COLONIAL, POSTCOLONIAL, AND INDIGENOUS PERCEPTIONS OF THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

Landscape has always occupied a central place in the imaginary of settler Australia.¹ Not only was it a dominant subject of textual and pictorial representations of Australia during the colonial era, but the concept of what is referred to in Australia as "the bush" continues in today's society to be invested with a very special importance in the minds of many non-Indigenous Australians. We see this in the iconic status the bush enjoys in art, fiction, and the contemporary cinema, the key role it plays in current settler-descendant identity discourse, and its sacralisation by twenty-first century conservationists, not to mention its rapidly growing attraction as a tourist destination for settler descendants of all ages and social backgrounds.

Yet if we examine the history of the settlers' transplantation into the isolated vastness of the "antipodean" continent, we cannot help but be struck by the traumatic, often adversarial and always problematical nature of that population's interaction with the Australian landscape. From the overwhelming sense of estrangement that engulfed those early immigrants on finding themselves confronted with a topography they simply could not read, to the ruthless environmental destruction carried out over generations by colonists seeking to anglicize the face of a country whose indigenous features they could not accept, Anglo-Celtic Australians' relationship with the landscape of their adopted homeland was fraught with feelings of alienation and hostility. "Colonial space," as David Bunn reminds us, "is a site of regular ontological shock. It is filled with competing indigenous meaning" (129).

Today, Anglo-Celtic attitudes towards Australia's greatly altered postcolonial scenery are shot through with guilt and contradiction, a situation that is reflected in the fact that one of the most urbanised societies in the world sees its national identity as being symbolised by a remote rurality in which the majority of its members — "The people on the 'restless fringe' ... [who] face away from the land and its limits" (Robin, "Home" np) — have never lived.

Country

As cultural anthropologist, Tim Ingold sees it, "landscape is constituted as an enduring record of — and testimony to — the lives and works of past generations

who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (152). Indeed, material evidence of Aboriginal existence was found embedded in the landscape wherever the early settlers ventured in Australia. The following extract from Mark McKenna's history of settlement in New South Wales provides a good example:

When king tides lashed the coast and eroded the sand dunes, the settlers found the bodies of Aboriginal people in the sand, 'doubled over in the fashion of burial.' When they searched for oysters at Wapengo Lake, north of Bega, they found their bodies in layers in the banks of the tidal lake. When they walked the land they saw the corroboree rings, the canoe and shield trees, the middens and the burial grounds. On the coast they came across the caves that Aboriginal people had used for shelter. When they ploughed the land they found Aboriginal bones, teeth, axes and tools. (73)

Yet, for almost two centuries after colonisation, the 50,000 years of Aboriginal occupation that had gone into shaping the very fabric of the pre-colonial landscape went unrecognised by a non-Indigenous population who sought to convert what they saw as an unhomely environment into a replica of that other place on the opposite side of the world which they continued to think of as their home. Such a transformation was conditional, of course, on the landscape becoming as W.J.T Mitchell puts it, "a place of amnesia and erasure, a strategic burying of the past" (262). Accordingly, the archetypal representation of pre-contact Australia as *Terra Nullius*, a blank page, an unpeopled, un-cultured, wasteland that cried out to be cultivated was no more than the self-legitimising fiction with which the insecure newcomers sought to reassure themselves of their legitimacy. For, as anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose affirms, there was, in reality, not one part of the country that had not already been densely inscribed with the physical signs and spiritual significations of the Aborigines' millennial, land-centred culture. "Here on this continent," she declares,

there is no place where the feet of Aboriginal humanity have not preceded those of the settler. Nor is there any place where the country was not once fashioned and kept productive by Aboriginal people's land management practices. There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation. (18)

It is a point that cannot be emphasised too strongly, if the nature of the interface between the early immigrants and Australia's natural environment is to be correctly understood.

Although the main focus of the discussion is the origins and the evolution of the Anglo-Celtic population's troubled relationship with the landscapes of Australia, I would like to approach the subject by looking first at how the continent's

Aboriginal inhabitants saw (and in many ways still see) what they call "country." I want to emphasise, however, that, having neither the expertise nor indeed, as a non-Aborigine, the pretension, to offer a comprehensive account of the infinitely complex and intricate cosmology of Australia's Indigenous peoples, what follows is necessarily a simple outline based on readings of Aboriginal and recent anthropological literature on the subject.

A good place to start is Rose's definition of what the term "country" signifies in Aboriginal English. It is, she underlines,

not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place [...]. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. (7)

For the Indigenous Australian, the human presence appears to be but one element, among other equally important animal, vegetable, and mineral constituents of what makes up "country." Unlike the "dominant political and economic cultures of Australia," which, according to Rose, "assert that some living things are to be eradicated, or, more negligently, simply stranded on a path toward death," (11) Aborigines appear to see themselves as being an organic part of ecosystems rather than as a separate intelligence that has control or dominion over nature (10–11). Interestingly, there is strong resistance to this idea on the part of certain postcolonial critics, understandably wary of essentialist Western readings of Indigenous peoples as "part of nature" (see, in particular, Goldie 1989). Yet, Aboriginal people themselves often not only have no complexes on this question but many clearly do not wish to draw the distinction between their being and that of the landscape to which they belong. As Indigenous author Bayet-Charlton puts it, "Aboriginal people are an integral part of the Australian landscape. We are the land, the land is us" (171).

At the root of the Indigenous peoples' relationship with landscape is the "Dreaming," an inadequate English term invented by non-Aborigines to reference an extraordinary nexus of concepts that has no equivalent in Western culture. To borrow the words of Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi, a Lajamanu woman, the Dreaming is "a total framework that accounts for every aspect of existence [...] inform[ing] the past, present and future, and dictat[ing] all moral and ethical behaviour as well as people's relationship with the natural environment."² As anthropologist Howard Morphy explains, according to the Dreaming, "the physical form of the earth ... [came] into being through the

actions of ancestral beings who travelled the earth from place to place, leaving evidence of their actions in the form of topographical features" (187). Thus, not only is "[t]he landscape ... redolent with memories of other human beings," (188) but, as Graeme Neate suggests, even the most apparently insignificant aspect of it is intertwined with the tribe's totemic history (30).

Responsibility for maintaining the good health and fertility of the country is jointly shared by the ancestral beings and their human descendants whose own well-being correlates intimately with that of the land. In Veronica Strang's view, it is "Aboriginal people's land management practices, especially their skilled and detailed use of fire," that are responsible for Australia's "long-term productivity and biodiversity" (10–11). Indigenous law, ceremony, and key rituals marking birth and death all reflect the central and sacred significance of landscape in the Aboriginal cosmos. Birth, Morphy informs us, "is the beginning of the process of associating a person with a place or set of places, of giving him or her an identity in the landscape," while "in mortuary rituals landscape is used both to represent an individual's life and as a means of reabsorbing the social person into the ancestral past" (197). Finally, to quote Rose once again, "much Aboriginal art, music, dance, [and] philosophy [...] has country as its focus or basis" (11).

Diametrically opposed, then, to the Aborigines' *fusional* relationship with their physical environment, was the Europeans' conception of landscape as a separate entity, a non-human space which they had both the right and the duty "to enter, subdue and make [...] fruitful, bringing culture and civilisation into Nature" (Strang 125). As John Jervis reminds us, the post-Enlightenment European self, "[became] a kind of transcendental observer of the world, able to intervene *in* it, through using the body, yet not really *of* it" (141). This distancing, or excising, of man from the natural landscape he inhabited — the "notion of an environment other than and external to the individual ego" (Gibson 8) which resulted in the modern Western understanding of nature as "a deposit of resources for potential use or a set of vistas for aesthetic appreciation" (Conolly qtd. in Jervis 136) — goes a long way towards helping us understand the behaviour Australia's early settlers adopted towards their new environment. It also explains why, from the establishment of the first British colony in Australia in 1788, the delicate ecological balance that Aborigines had maintained for tens of thousands of years was doomed to destruction.

Discovery

As Edward Said reminds us, "[t]he great voyages of geographical discovery from da Gama to Captain Cook were motivated [not only] by curiosity and scientific fervour, but also [by] a spirit of domination" (247). When James Cook

approached the East coast of Australia in April 1770, he had already satisfied the scientific curiosity that had motivated his expedition to the South Seas. He was thus free to attend to the secondary aim of his explorations: namely, to claim for the British Crown any wild, unoccupied lands “discovered” in the course of his voyage. The more ideological orientation of this final phase of his mission is impressed upon the journal entry which records his first sighting of *Terra Australis Incognita*. The landscape, he reports on April 20, 1770, “had a very agreeable and promising aspect” (Wharton np). The imperialist intention that is merely implicit in the use of the term “promising” here is soon more overtly articulated in subsequent entries in his journal — which describe physical features of the Australian landscape exclusively in terms of their potential usefulness to future settlers. The following extract dated May 3, 1770, is a typical example:

We found the face of the Country much the same as I have before described, but the land much richer for instead of sand I found in many places a deep black soil, which we thought was Capable of producing any kind of grain. At present it produceth, besides Timber, as fine Meadow as ever was seen; however, we found it not all like this, some few places were very rocky, but this, I believe, to be uncommon. The stone is sandy, and very proper for building, etc...

Reflection on the aesthetic value of the country’s landscapes is, for the most part, precluded by the “utilitarian ideology of land function” (Ryan 57) that dominates Cook’s account of South East Australia. A further oversight of a quite different and altogether more consequential nature, however, is the navigator’s failure to observe any causal link between the particular configuration of those landscapes and the widespread existence of “Natives” to which his journal repeatedly refers. Scanning the country for its potential to sustain European colonisation, Cook’s appraising eye skims over signs of Aboriginal occupation, denying the “inconvenient” reality they represent. The country, he asserts in August 1770, must be regarded as being “in the pure state of nature; *the Industry of Man has had nothing to do with any part of it*” (Wharton np. *Italics added.*).

By insisting on the absolute lack of human intervention in what he describes as the “flourishing state” of Australia’s natural environment, Cook is, as Judith Wright points out, “removing all Australian occupiers of the land from consideration as possessors of it” (143) — a discursive manoeuvre that clears the way of any moral obstacle to the development of European agriculture that the captain immediately goes on to envision. “[I]t can never be doubted but what most sorts of Grain, Fruit, roots, etc., of every kind would flourish here were they once brought hither, planted and Cultivated by the hands of Industry; and here are Provender for more Cattle, at all seasons of the Year, than ever can be brought into the Country.”

Naming

One further aspect of Cook's record worth commenting on briefly is his naming of topographical features. Like all explorers of what Europe disingenuously referred to as 'the New World,' Cook names the places he 'discovers' like a god in the act of creation. Striking natural characteristics, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic analogies, empirical observations, or the mere hazard of the calendar constitute the main sources of inspiration for the naming process in which he engages. At the same time, many of the toponyms Cook devises are inspired by more worldly motives — in consequence of which, many of the hills, bays, islands and capes of the South East Australian coastline bear, to this day, the names of prominent figures from the naval, aristocratic, or political establishment of eighteenth-century Britain.

The significance of imposing English names on the Australian landscape is twofold. Not only does it extinguish any existent nomenclature reflecting an Indigenous knowledge of the country, but also it signals a future in which the Aboriginal history of such places will eventually be eradicated. The enormous symbolic power of the colonial naming process is evidenced in the intense emotions that are unleashed within settler-descendant communities today by any suggestion of restoring Aboriginal place names to local sites. Aboriginal names represent the depth of the Indigenous population's association with the land, and thus their capacity to de-stabilise the more recent and shallower implantation of Australia's non-Indigenous inhabitants (Gardner qtd in Seddon 25).

Commenting on the virulent opposition of Anglo-Celts to a re-naming proposal put forward in western Victoria in 1989, Tony Birch explains, "[a]ttaching names to landscapes legitimises the ownership of the culturally dominant group that 'owns' the names" (150).³ Strang similarly argues that naming "stamps the identity of individuals and groups upon the land, bringing it into their perceived sphere of control" (217).

Exploration and Settlement

Though the considerable body of exploration literature generated by the lengthy, overland expeditions of the early nineteenth century offers a much vaster and more detailed picture of the continent's topography than Cook's brief account of the hinterland beyond the New South Wales coastline, the ideological perspective from which the explorers view Australia's landscapes does not differ significantly from that of the navigator.⁴ There is undeniably greater emphasis given to the picturesqueness of the scenery but, as Ryan points out

[a]esthetic descriptions which show pleasure in the way nature has 'arranged itself' move easily into speculations about the suitability of these

arrangements for the colonising enterprise. Often, the Australian landscape is seen as ready made for the occupation of a European power and its agriculture." (73)

Both the explorers themselves and the settlers that followed in their wake evince just as great an ignorance of (or willed obliviousness to) the impact of human labour in shaping the landscapes they behold as Cook himself had manifested. In Ryan's words, "[t]he disbelief in the indigene's power to transform the landscape plays a large role in the journals' construction of the 'park-like' lands they describe as the products of accident, or as areas divinely intended for colonial settlement" (73).

The English gentleman's park was, as Bernard Smith has demonstrated, one of the most widely-used analogies that early observers had recourse to when attempting to represent the Australian landscape. Worth noting here, then, is David Bunn's suggestion that

what we often find in the colonial landscape is an exaggerated form of *anacalis*, or "propping," of one landscape paradigm upon another. Freud uses the term "anacalis" to describe the way desires are propped upon instincts, having the same site of articulation; this seems an entirely appropriate way of describing the often unconscious deployment of paradigms, in dependent association with one another and at the same site. (144)

Not only did several members of the First Fleet leave written records describing the land around Port Jackson as park-like, but, Smith shows us, early pictorial representations of the area also relied heavily on the nobleman's park analogy, depicting "a countryside composed of gentle lawn-like foregrounds which slope down to a lake-like harbour backed by evenly rounded hills which are dotted with isolated clumps of trees and fringed with long belts of timber" (133-34).

Rather than recognising that it was the intelligent husbanding of the landscape by the Aborigines "whose systematic burning-off was largely responsible for giving the country its park-like appearance," late eighteenth and early nineteenth century European observers chose, as Richard White claims, to interpret the country's grasslands as "natural" and its Indigenous inhabitants as "pests, obstacles in the way of men realising their dream of becoming landed gentleman" (30). As David Lowenthal comments:

At the outset, imperial settlers were hardly aware of indigenous impacts, blind to signs of non-European occupation. They assumed that they saw virtually untouched virgin lands, 'almost fresh from the Maker's hands.' That indigenes without permanent farms or advanced tools had, over millennia, profoundly altered New World landscapes, and

were still doing so, long went unrecognized. To be sure, it suited colonial incomers to overlook signs of native alteration; the apparent absence of indigenous improvements' helped to justify the removal of indigenes from tribal lands. (234)

Omitting the markers of Aboriginal existence from representations of a landscape that was being assessed for its economic potential was, of course, a discursive practice that followed directly in the tradition of the "cartographic trope" which, in Simon Ryan's words, had constructed "the southern continent as blank, awaiting colonial inscription"; as Ryan goes on to remind us, moreover, this kind of semiotic construction is one "which justifies, indeed urges, European intervention" (11). And European intervention was, naturally, the desired goal of all the interest groups who stood to profit financially from emigration to the new colony (R. White 32).

Marketing Australia to Potential Settlers

As William Cronon notes in the context of British settlement in America,

those who sought to promote the colonial enterprises tended to put the best possible face on everything they encountered in the New World. Selective reporting, exaggeration, and downright lies could all be useful tools in accomplishing this task. (34)

Typical of the kind of marketing ploy used to sell the colonies to potential British emigrants is the image of Australia as "an idealised Arcadian society, a rural utopia, an Eden before the fall," (R. White 33) so often reflected in depictions of the landscape dating from the early colonial period. "After 1830," Bernard Smith observes, "artists and travellers in describing the Australian scene have the practical interests of prospective migrants very much in mind" (177). Marketing the attractions of Australia to British workers was particularly successfully accomplished by English aristocrat, Samuel Sidney who, in 1852, published *The Three Colonies of Australia: New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia*, a book, which as Kay Schaffer points out "sold 5000 copies in its first year of publication and helped to convince countless numbers of men to migrate to the promised land" (92).

Another work conceived with the clear intention of attracting potential British settlers to the continent was Captain James Wallis's *An Historical Account of the Colony of New South Wales* (1821). The book's engravings, the reader is informed, demonstrate "from what slender beginnings, and how few years, the primeval forest (...) may be converted into plains covered with bleating flocks, lowing herds and waving corn; may (...) be changed from a mournful and desolate wilderness, into the cheerful village, the busy town and the crowded city" (qtd. in Smith 179).

Joseph Lycett's *Views in Australia or New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land delineated* (1824-5) had a similarly promotional mission. On each of the pages facing the artist's lithographs, there was, Rosslyn Haynes informs us, "a description indicating how the scene should be read, emphasising picturesqueness alongside the potential for settlement and commercial exploitation" (88-9). Significantly, a large number of the visual records that Lycett left of Australia attest to a genuine interest on the part of the convict-artist in the country's Aboriginal inhabitants, of whose everyday life and culture he painted many attractive and vibrant scenes. But while these early visions of the colony represent the landscape as little more than a harmonious backdrop to an Indigenous people whose exotic activities dominate the foreground, picturesque scenery becomes, in the lithographs used to illustrate *Views in Australia*, the subject. Space, no longer identified with the autochthones who inhabit it, has, to use W.J.T. Mitchell's terms, been reduced to "what can be seen from a distant point of view, a prospect that dominates, frames, and codifies the landscape in terms of a set of fairly predictable conventions — poetic, picturesque, sublime, pastoral, and so on" (265), and the now empty landscape "smashes the traces of indigenous or aboriginal dwelling" (274).

Settler Alienation

For tens of thousands of immigrants seduced by the images of pastoral beauty and economic potential that books like Lycett's and Wallis's offered, the reality that confronted them "down under" was often experienced as the hellish antithesis of a bucolic idyll. Heirs of "an economic mode developed in a fertile land that had been farmed intensively for centuries" (Strang 110), these early colonists were overcome with feelings of estrangement at the disorientating 'wildness' of the scenery, the fearful absence from the landscape of any natural or cultural elements with which they could identify.⁵ The mainly negative response towards the landscape that would determine Anglo-Celtic behaviour for generations to come thus sprang essentially from the settlers' inability (or refusal) to understand correctly what they saw. As David Bunn explains, "the colonial subject must negotiate between two worlds: the recently lost metropolitan home, and the uncoded Otherness of the present. The new prospect is measured against the old familiar order, and it is usually found lacking" (138). Or, as Judith Wright more graphically puts it, "We came with Europe in our heads, the green fields and farms of other countries" (97). Faced with alien terrain and a totally unfamiliar climate, newcomers to Australia tended to interpret the available evidence in the light of the experience they had brought with them. The problem with that reflex is, George Seddon indicates, that "[i]n a new environment, our prior experience may turn out to be irrelevant or even substantially misleading [...]. We have to learn to see in an unfamiliar setting" (11).

The role of language in structuring the Anglo-Celts' way of seeing the Australian landscape was decisive. As Philip Roe explains:

More than one writer in English has been troubled by the disjunction between the available and defined colours in the English language and the perception of the non-matching colours of the Australian landscape. The landscape is assimilated towards available subject positions of the language, mediated by a spectral visual and linguistic relation to another, European, landscape. (10)

Citing the theory of lexical cartographer, Jay Arthur, Kim Scott makes the similar point that since the English spoken by Anglo-Celtic Australians originates in a physical environment which is quite different from that in which they actually live, it needs to be understood as a language which is "set to the Default Country." According to Arthur, "[t]he Default Country ... is narrow, green, hilly and wet, which makes Australia wide, brown, flat and dry." This is why, explains Scott, "[t]he word "drought" in a country where rainfall is naturally irregular [...] encourages us to be disappointed, to feel cheated, to see the land as hostile" (219). A further example provided by George Seddon is the inappropriate use of the word "infertile" — with its essentially negative connotations — to describe soils on which many species of indigenous vegetation grow. The reality, Seddon suggests, is that the soils to which such a term is applied are simply "not much good for growing the things that we want to grow. They are perfect for the things *they* want to grow " (18, italics added).

Environmental Destruction⁶

The resentment that beleaguered settlers felt towards a country that failed to meet their expectations often mutated into a pathological hostility towards the landscape itself — a psychological reflex that resulted in two highly destructive impulses: firstly — a wholesale rejection of the indigenous, which expressed itself through the project of systematically transforming what was seen as "unwrought Nature" (Gibson 87–8) into an environment that reflected "European cultural precepts and values" (Strang 11). And secondly — an implacable determination on the part of settlers to exploit landscapes they felt they could not love, in the hope of making enough money to return to those they did. Both reactions led, ultimately, to ecological disaster for Australia.

Parcelling out land according to the "rectilinear grid imposed [...] by the geometers of a remote imperial power" (Seddon 150–51), "squaring off [the] old, irregular landscape to impose an order convenient to an authoritarian colonial administration" (151), erecting fences, importing cattle, ploughing the earth, planting crops, constructing roads and railways, and putting up buildings — those "most visually intrusive cultural markers" (Cowlshaw 53) — all

attested to a way of seeing the landscape, that was profoundly antithetical to “indigenous meanings of country”(53). On the one hand, indigenous plants and trees that had a multiplicity of practical and spiritual meanings for Aborigines were, Judith Wright observes, seen by settlers as mere “worthless cumberers of the ground, to be cleared away as soon as possible in favour of a cultivated and Europeanised landscape” (30). On the other, Wright continues, the boundaries by means of which Europeans imposed their own proprietorial logic on all of Australia’s desirable land,

took as little account as possible of the natural contours, slopes, soils, aspects and ground cover of the Aboriginal landscape, and of its swamplands, watercourses and forests. Compared with the land-use patterns of Aboriginal days, which took ecological rather than mathematical laws as their base, such a network was ecologically farcical. (34)

The transformation of Aboriginal country into a landscape more in line with an Anglo-Celtic aesthetic was also accomplished through the introduction of British flowers (both wild and garden varieties), shrubs, trees, songbirds, gamebirds, foxes, rabbits, deer and a multiplicity of other wild and domesticated animals — all of which were imported in what would quickly prove to be ecologically devastating numbers.

In addition to provoking environmental destruction, the massive importation of plants and animals from outside Australia, had the further effect of rendering obsolete the detailed and extensive knowledge that Aborigines possessed of the pre-colonial environment (Fox np). Geoffrey Blainey notes, for example, that “[a]lmost every land food eaten [in Australia] today belongs to species of flora and fauna introduced to the continent within the last 200 years. Accordingly the plentiful foods available to aboriginals (sic) slowly slipped from common knowledge” (*Triumph* 218). The loss of this vital source of information has, Libby Robin indicates, been compounded by the fact that knowledge of indigenous species has, until recently, never been a priority for white Australia’s environmental experts:

The cumulative work of Australian ecologists, plant and animal alike, focused predominantly on the development of non-indigenous food species. Acclimatization and the development of improved varieties of imported species, along with pest, pathogen and weed eradication, were the sciences that were perceived as serving ‘national needs.’ Indigenous flora and fauna had rarely been the subject of study, and the lack of groundwork in this sort of biology made respectably quantified ecological work even more difficult. (71)

Refashioning the landscape in the image of ‘home’ did not, as Wright’s earlier comment suggests, simply mean adding to it natural elements which the settlers

missed; it also entailed the wholesale eradication of an environment in which they felt out of their element. Sometimes the destruction was incidental, as when the imported sheep and cattle pulverised Australia's friable soils and delicate grasses. In Eric Rolls's estimation, it took a mere six years for the green and lovely pasture land over which early settlers rhapsodized to disappear. As he explains:

The ground powdered under [the] cutting hooves [of cattle and sheep], then hardened when it rained. The plants had never had to push their roots through hard ground; they had never had their leaves bruised by cloven hooves; they had never had whole bunches of leaves torn off between a set of bottom teeth and a top-jaw pad. They died." (39)

In other cases, environmental destruction seems to have been deliberate, the result of an obsessive preoccupation with dominating a landscape perceived as inimical as well as alien. Blainey, for example, quotes a settler from Gippsland as saying at the end of his life that his one ardent wish is to stand on the summit of a nearby mountain and be able to observe that "Not one vestige remains of the vast forest that once so stubbornly resisted our labours" (*A Land* 360). Offering specific examples of what such deforestation of the Australian landscape meant in real terms, Michael Williams notes that

astride the New South Wales/Queensland border lay the 'Big Scrub,' a rainforest of well over 4 million hectares which was described as 'all but impenetrable jungle, a lush profusion of vegetable growth.' Between 1880 and 1910, however, over 2.8 million hectares were cleared for dairying, sugar growing and timber (174).

The ecological colonisation that Australia experienced was by no means unique. All over the Empire, John Mackenzie argues, "[m]ammals, birds, freshwater fish, insects, pathogens, trees, plants and weeds set about the creation of neo-Europes, exotic environments comprehensively overlaid with the extensive biota of the new conquerors" (219).

Colonial incomers entered their new environment through a landscape that could never be fully divested of its alien nature simply by eliminating its indigenous animal, vegetable, and mineral aspects. "Civilising" the country also meant getting rid of its native inhabitants who were viewed — much like the vegetation itself — as emblematic of the detested wilderness. Delving into the press archives of the Eden-Monaro area of New South Wales, historian Mark McKenna quotes from an obituary in the *Bega District News* of 19 April 1937, in which it is explained that, although during the early life of the deceased pioneer "blacks were numerous and at times troublesome," and that Patrick McNamara had "lived to see them almost entirely disappear. He saw the district transformed from a wilderness into its present state" (93).

A Change of Perspective

Until well into the second half of the twentieth century, then, there was little awareness and even less concern among settlers and their descendants regarding the long-term consequences of their aggressive and profligate exploitation of the country's natural resources. Referring to the behaviour of timber cutters in New South Wales, McKenna observes that:

Large trees were often felled without concern for wastage, with as little as 20 per cent of the log sometimes being used, the remainder being left to rot on the forest floor. Well into the 1960s, newspapers carried photographs of timber workers felling big trees. Like the photographs of anglers holding 'big fish' that often adorned the walls of hotels and clubs, lumberjacks were seen in the press standing proudly in front of trees with a girth of over 30 feet. (139)⁷

Like the stories told by North America's colonisers, traditional accounts of Australia's colonisation revolve around the notion of triumph over a wild continent (Haynes 85), resonating with an Old Testament discourse that constructs wilderness as "dangerous and uncivilised" (Wright 144), "an undelightful place of physical hardship and danger [...] associated with God's displeasure and hence with spiritual and moral danger" (Haynes 84). In the last few decades, however, this biblical view of wilderness has undergone drastic revision. By the 1980s, claims Wright, "[t]hrough the perception of Australia as a country to loot still ruled, and though its scars were many and deepening, there was a new realisation, among some, of the subtlety and uniqueness of its landscapes" (42).

Today, the Wilderness Society's website informs us that market research carried out at the demand of the Australian Heritage Commission in 1996 indicates that most contemporary Australians "strongly value wilderness areas and are concerned about their conservation" ("What is Wilderness?" np). For the inhabitants of an essentially urban world that has become increasingly frenetic, materialistic, polluted, violent and stressful, the once unloved, "uncivilised" space of the "hostile" bush has come to be seen as the last bastion of peace, freedom, purity and spirituality. To some extent, this re-conceptualisation of wilderness is, Strang argues, the result of

a dissatisfaction with scientific rationalism, which, while it offers intellectual and material control of the environment, provides little spiritual or emotional sustenance. 'Wilderness' is partly a mystification of the landscape; it contains both sacramental and moral precepts, and places them squarely within the natural world. (55)

This late-twentieth-century conversion to environmentalism, the sudden blooming of love for a natural landscape that had, for generations, been

regarded as "an adversary to be subjugated" (Strang 56) has, as in other highly industrialised Western nations, resulted in a strong demand for the creation of national parks.

That does not mean, however, that settler-descendants' favourable re-evaluation of Australia's natural landscapes has produced an entirely positive outcome. If George Seddon is to be believed, there are few Australians today who are capable of recognising what an indigenous landscape looks like (70). Moreover, as Strang underlines, although the purported aim of establishing wilderness areas is to protect different types of threatened countryside, what has actually happened in certain states is that parks have been created only on land that is perceived as having "no other commercial value"(64). An additional problem has been the sometimes summary taking over of Aboriginal territory by National Parks commissions without prior negotiation or consultation with the land's Indigenous owners (Strang 64). There is also the vexed question of how the revised, postcolonial appreciation of "wilderness," an essentially Western, aesthetic vision, will impact, in the long term, on a culture that is seemingly devoid of the very concepts of "vista," "panorama," "landscape" or "wilderness." After many years of living with the Yolngu people of Arnhem land, biological anthropologist Neville White reports that he has been unable to discover any Aboriginal words that express such concepts (193).

In the contemporary Western mind, the term "wilderness" inevitably connotes pure, pristine nature, a space both untouched by man and free from any permanent human occupation or interference. Thus, at worst, "[t]he creation of wilderness model national parks often means uprooting inconvenient indigenous inhabitants" (Stevens qtd. in Strang 146). At the very least, Aboriginal ownership and hunting rights are adversely affected by the existence of such parks as increasing numbers of visitors now feel authorised to venture where they will in areas previously designated Aboriginal Reserves (Strang 64). It is a situation which has provoked considerable resentment and discomfort in Indigenous communities where there is a growing feeling that white people stare too much, are too invasive, and are rapacious in their hunting and fishing practices (65). Moreover, by foregrounding the ecological uniqueness, natural beauty and recreational potential of wilderness areas, the environmentalist movement—including National Parks administrators, "greenies," and particularly tourist operators — is also guilty, in Strang's view, of representing landscapes and their biota as so many "saleable commodit[ies]" (203–4), a way of *seeing* that is totally discordant with the Aboriginal way of *being* in the world.

Conclusion

I would like to make clear that the Aboriginal peoples I have referred to throughout this essay are those who constitute the tiny, unrepresentative

minority of autochthones that have managed somehow to cling onto a traditional, land-based existence. Dislocated, detribalised, de-territorialised, dispossessed, the overwhelming majority of Australia's Indigenous communities have been condemned by colonisation to live in exile from landscapes that were once "the key, the matrix, the essential heart of life" (Rose 11). Robbed of their former *raison d'être*, they are now, like all of the world's "first peoples," ravaged by epidemic levels of alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicide. Yet the Aboriginal notion of "country" has not been entirely extinguished. It survives in what, for want of a more appropriate term, we might loosely refer to as a 'race memory,' energising activists in the Land Rights movement, nourishing in many members of a destitute and often hopeless population the dream of an eventual return to the origins of all meaningful existence. Describing how Aborigines, whatever their present circumstances, still *belong* to their country, Aboriginal Land Rights activist Galarrwuy Yunupingu argues:

Native Title is in the ground and the trees, the rocks and the water; it's in the songs and the dancing, it's in the painting; it's in me and it's in the land. I ask you to understand this. You can't separate us and you can't destroy it while there is one Aboriginal person still alive who knows the law. (np)

Meanwhile, the descendants of those first incomers who once despoiled vast swathes of a continent whose uncultivated "wastes" were anathema to the European eye, today seek refuge, perhaps even redemption, in enclaves of what Dean MacCannell calls "marked-off, interpreted, museumized nature" (qtd. in Jervis 152), the last vestiges of a wilderness their ancestors toiled to destroy and that they now celebrate as the source of their national heritage. Barred by their history and culture from experiencing themselves — at least in the way that Aborigines describe — as *part of* the Australian landscape, they have learned to be, at least, its attentive, if remorse-stricken, admirers.

Let the final word go, then, to Mitchell, whose observations on postcolonial relationships with landscape so singularly reflect the experience of contemporary Australia's settler-descendant population:

[M]ore people now probably have an appreciation of scenic beauty, precisely because they are so estranged from it. Landscape is now more precious than ever—an endangered species that has to be protected from and by civilization, kept safe in museums, parks and shrinking "wilderness areas." Like imperialism itself, landscape is an object of nostalgia in a postcolonial and postmodern era, reflecting a time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny and an unbounded "prospect" of endless appropriation and conquest. (20)

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Endnotes

¹ A brief word of explanation concerning the terminology used in this essay to refer to the non-Indigenous population on which much of the discussion focuses: the term 'settler' is used to refer to that population of Anglo-Celtic origins that emigrated to Australia in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, settled there, and formed the foundations of what would eventually become the modern Australian nation. 'Settler descendants' is intended to signify all subsequent generations of Anglo-Celtic Australians descended from the first waves of the colony's non-Indigenous inhabitants. When the term 'immigrants' is used, it is to distinguish those who went to Australia of their own volition from the transportees who obviously did not. If I eschew the term 'settler invader,' preferred by some, it is because I consider it to be tautological. 'Settlers', as I understand the term, are always invaders of territory already occupied by other populations.

² Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi, in a personal communication to Australian academic, Christine Nicholls, Lajamanu, June 1994 and subsequently passed on to me by Christine Nicholls.

³ In a later paper analysing the same episode but from a different perspective, Laura Kostanski asserts that within six months of the announcement of the removal of existing European place names and their replacement by Aboriginal names, almost 18, 000 signatures had been collected for petitions which rejected this move and innumerable letters hostile to any such name changes had been published in the local and national press (7).

⁴ A masterly deconstruction of the discourse of exploration literature in general is offered by Mary-Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* (1992) while excellent analyses of exploration discourse specific to Australia are to be found both in Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987) and Simon Ryan's *Cartographic Eye* (1996). Carter's work as a whole is an invaluable source of stimulating and innovative insights into spatial history and colonial/postcolonial relationships with landscape.

⁵ David Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon* (1993) offers a particularly convincing portrait of settler alienation from the landscape.

⁶ The ecological catastrophes that now threaten Australia as a direct result of previous Eurocentric interpretations of the landscape do not fall within the purview of the present study. Worth noting though is the existence of numerous Australian novels which feature the vast and deleterious alterations to the landscape that rapidly resulted from the new "set of intentions" (Cowlshaw 59) the early settlers impressed upon it. Two particularly apocalyptic visions are those found respectively in Richardson's *Australia Felix* (13) and Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* (43-4). For a recent, non-fictional indictment of settler Australians' destructive relationship with their landscapes see Greer's *Whitefella Jump Up*.

⁷ Referring to some of the local histories that were submitted for inclusion in the 1922 Jubilee Exhibition to mark 50 years of "free, compulsory and secular" education in Victoria Chris Healy, on the other hand, offers a rather different view, commenting that "With surprising frequency the school histories express a sense of regret at the impact of mining or the mass destruction of flora and fauna that came with land clearance" (126).

