

Book Reviews

Reclaiming the Past to Find the Future*

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* The books reviewed are :

Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia. Lines, William J. North Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1991. 337 pp; \$19.95, soft cover.

Like Nowhere Else. A video by Film Australia, Eton Road, Lindfield, NSW, 2070 (Phone 02 413 8777). Produced for Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, 1991. 12 minutes, with teaching notes, 1991. Cost: \$59.95.

'Without an acquaintance with the past, one remains complicit in the orthodoxy of the present. Only when Australians reclaim their own history, a history they made, can they succeed not only in fighting for nature, but also *against* an historical trend of which a poorer and uglier world is the result.' (author's emphases).

In these concluding sentences, Lines articulates one of the most important challenges of environmental education. However, he begs the question of how it is to be done; that task is for the educator. It is difficult for anyone to understand the ways that things once were, why they are as they are now, and how they might be.

Lines sets out 'to trace how the ideas of the Enlightenment contributed to Australia's human-made landscape, how the promise of conquest was reconstructed on Australian soil and converted to fact: a continent robbed, people and animals exterminated, land pauperised, air and water poisoned, forests eliminated'. (p. 279)

For most readers, Lines' most significant achievement will probably be to increase their understanding of the events that lead to the Australian landscape being as it is, for this is the ground that is covered with flair and eloquence. What's more its scope is far wider than any other work that is accessible, and it documents a history in which the land has been inhabited for at least 50,000 years.

There have been few worthwhile attempts to publish a broad history of the environment in Australia. Jock Marshall's *The Great Extermination* and Charles Birch's *Confronting the Future* come to mind as achievements of the

1960s and 1970s respectively. Without doubt, *Taming The Great South Land* is in the same league, and probably the best as an introduction into the nature of rural Australia.

As a goal-free evaluator, I would like to suggest that the following themes dominate the narrative in a most convincing manner.

1. 'For those controlling the new science and technology, power over nature turned out to be power over fellow humans' (p. 17). Most Australians 'accepted the fundamental ideology of modern society, that pursuit of mastery over nature would bind the bitterly divided human species. (p 184).
2. 'Australia's leaders repeatedly expressed their allegiance, not to the land, not to the country of their birth, but to overseas imperial interests' (p. 219).

Given the number of Australia's former leaders educated in institutions trying to emulate the playing fields of Eton, one should not be surprised by the second theme, although such speculation is outside the scope of this book.

The unparalleled scope of the book is its greatest gift to the reader. It allows a level of analysis previously unavailable to any but the most persistent. Not surprisingly if one is going to paint a broad area a large brush is needed, and so the work has been based on secondary sources, but good ones at that. Efforts are continually made to portray events through the minds of the participants.

Lines is relentless in pointing out the destruction meted out by capitalism upon the landscape, and often cynical of the attempts of politicians and bureaucrats. Sometimes this leads to analyses which are less than fair. For example, in the late 1960s, there was a fight over the Little Desert in Western Victoria, resulting in the establishment of the Land Conservation Council. Amongst the cynicism, there is a poorly-researched and old evaluation of the work of this body which in consultation with the community, has developed plans for the management of most of Victoria's public land. Amongst many other things, this has resulted in the development of (for Victoria) massive national parks in the Mallee and the Alps. A real success story for Victoria's environment which is unacknowledged, and one of its early key players, R.G.Downes is rubbished as a cold, rational scientist. As Mark Anthony said: 'The evil that men do lives after them, the good is interred with their bones'. This example is given to illustrate that a publication such as Lines' is terrific for viewing the landscape, but be careful before using a pair of binoculars as a microscope.

In many ways, Mark Anthony's comments are applicable to the whole publication. Earlier generations have indeed devastated our environment, and we continue that tradition. But they have also created a positive environment for most Australians and have established a capacity for contributing to the

food needs of a world population expected to rise from the present 5.5 billion to 8.5 billion by 2025.

A sub-theme is the interactions between the Aboriginal people and the settlers. Lines writes 'At no time during the European settlement on Australia did the dispossession of the Aborigines disturb the conscience of the disposers (sic)' (p. 41) This might appear to be the situation. It might be contemporary public opinion, but it is wrong. My reading is that there have always been saints and there have always been bastards. Within a few years of the establishment of Port Phillip settlement, the Rev J. R. Orton wrote in a Report:

'The Government is fast disposing of (the natives') lands ... and no reserve whatever of land is made for the provision of the natives, neither in securing to them sufficient portions of their own native land as hunting ground, nor otherwise providing them with their necessities. The result of which is that the natives who remain in the neighbourhood of the settled districts become pilfering, starving, and obtrusive mendicants, and after incalculable deprivations, abuses and miseries, will gradually pine - die away and become extinct (because)...no adequate provision is made for them' (Wiencke, S. W. *When the Wattles Bloom Again: The Life and Times of William Barak*, 1984, p. 33).

This is not an isolated dissent as a reading of the history of settlement in Victoria and New South Wales will show. Lines, however, is correct in most of his conclusions concerning the original inhabitants of Australia and has done us a service by restoring some of their story to the story of their land. The protests against the actions of the settlers were usually ignored. Another weakness of the publication is that it misses significant publications of the last decade, such as the *Historic Records of Victoria* volume 2A and 2B on the Aboriginal (Koori) people, and John Harris's monumental work *One Blood* (Albatross, 1990). Whilst such historical analyses at times may be 'academic', perpetuating the myth that 'Van Dieman's land Aborigines died out in 1876' (p 48) serves to add fuel to those who oppose land rights.

There are snippets of interest right through this book. It is straightforward to read, and its mix of report and interpretation holds one's attention. The publisher's 'blurb' claims that *Taming the Great South Land* is 'a profound new history of Australia ... an epic saga of the human impact on the Australian environment'. These are reasonable claims.

One villain to escape scrutiny was the motor car. Air travellers in Australia will have noticed how rare it is to find a decent patch of 'bush' in the outback that hasn't got a track running through it. People who try to breathe in Australian cities need to be reminded of the automobile that dominates the city air and landscape.

This is a fine book, and worthy to be read by all who would teach others about the five million square kilometres that is in the trust of all Australians. It gives the reader access to an unusually wide range of information about rural Australia, and some insight into our cities. It is truly a story of the interactions between people and their environment. It has the potential for use as a reader for senior secondary school students as well as any teacher who accepts responsibility for teaching about the environment, and teaching for the environment.

Like Nowhere Else is a series of short segments of video, each illustrating changes in the Australian environment since white settlement, or the invasion as some prefer to call it. The topics are Land, Forest, Flora and Fauna, Water, and Climate. These present a pretty depressing story, so just to inoculate us against either action or depression, or both, there is a final section which outlines some of recent government initiatives concerning the environment. Given the limited time frame of each segment, it is not surprising that the teacher is left to relate the issues personally to the viewers. This is a strength of this video, giving considerable adaptability.

The photography is creative, beautiful and captivating. For the initiated Robin Williams' voice gives the commentary authority and security. The accompanying booklet asserts that 'The overall message is clear. We must take more initiative to change our ways to work WITH the environment for a sustainable future, or maybe there will be no future'. (original emphasis)

Each segment lasts a couple of minutes, and is ideal for focussing attention on an issue as an introduction and discussion-starter, or as a summary for where a learning sequence may have been. I think that it will serve the former purpose better.

The booklet gives a set of definitions, and for each section of the video there is a set of classroom activities that give the classroom teacher some ideas from which to develop appropriate learning strategies for his or her class. Most of the activities seem to be focussed at about the middle level of secondary school, but could be varied up and down. Importantly the video's visuals have the potential for use at age levels below the standard of the commentary. The commentary could probably be used with junior secondary school students, although some of the big words would need to be explained before the video was shown. At times one feels as if one is being machine-gunned down with statistical data, but generally this is not overbearing. Sometimes the language is so economical that one suspects that some secondary school students would find it difficult.

In summary, *Like Nowhere Else* is a worthwhile teaching resource with its effectiveness determined by the skills of the teacher who uses it. Together these two publications bring together a series of views of the past which help us to recognise the present so that we might plan and work for the future. There are few more noble goals in life.