

Committee for whom ‘bushland’ was public land, free of agricultural development: “For one generation bush-bashing meant heroism, for the next vandalism”.

Like Libby Robin, Tom Griffith tells a Victorian story – but in contrast with Robin’s desert, Tom Griffith (2001) takes us to the steep, wet and dense tall mountain ash forests. He tells an eloquent story of the ecological and social history of the mountain ash forest. Inserted into Griffith’s narrative are ‘spotlights’ about these forests from scientists and curators at Museum Victoria. Griffith’s story starts with a discussion of the relationship between fire and wet sclerophyll forests and Aboriginals prior to European settlement: ‘The land that Europeans thought they had discovered was... “nor as God made it. It was as the Aborigines made it”’ (p.6). After this first chapter Griffith traces the interactions between humans and the tall trees from the early European settlers through Black Friday of 1939 and its long-term impact on the forests and the people. What Griffith gives the reader is not a history of the growth of a protest movement but a highly readable and appropriately illustrated story that immerses the reader in the changing mountain ash forest environment across the decades.

The last three books in this short review both provide histories of ecological thought – one a very solid and useful literature review from Western (including Australian) perspective (Hay 2002), the second, a social history of Australian ecological thought as reflected through a collection of work from Australian authors (Mulligan and Hill 2001), and the third (Seddon 1998), a personal collection of ecological thoughts.

Peter Hay reviews the main strands in environmental thought that underpin our politics, our literature, our thinking and our governance. These include ecophilosophy, ecofeminism, spirituality, green critiques of science and knowledge and green political thought traditions (conservative, liberal, socialist and postmodern). The bibliography that underpins this review is a wonderful reference resource. Although the ideas are very clearly explained this text is probably more suited to teachers and researchers than school students.

Mulligan and Hill start from the premise that histories of ecological thought rarely mention Australian writers so they have redressed this absence by tracing the emergence of ecological understandings in Australia by drawing on the work of Australian writers. This book traces the emergence of ecological understandings in Australia through focusing on various fields in the arts, sciences, politics and public life and the work of Australians in these areas. Within this structure there are chapters on the colonisation of Australian nature and early ecological thought, people and landscapes in Australian art, land and identity in Australian literature, journalists as educators, the birth of the conservation movement, innovations in ecological science and land and resource management, the Aboriginal land rights movement, wilderness politics, social justice agendas and ecophilosophy.

George Seddon’s (1998) *Landprints* is a collection of essays about landscape from across his lifetime. Through stories of his experiences from across Australia he discusses how we use and abuse the Australian land and what makes those who live on the land uniquely Australian. Topics covered include perceptions and attitudes, the sense of place, Australian and Western science, and an interesting reading of the rhetoric and ethics of the environmental protest movement.

What I like about this collection of books is their complementarity and convergence, as well as cross-referencing. For example, Mulligan and Hill include references to Bonyhady’s, Seddon’s, and Hutton and Connors’ books. Combine these seven books with Bonyhady (2000) and the two beautiful catalogues of paintings of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australian landscapes (Johns, Sayers, Kornhauser with Ellis 1998) and Australian art and society in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (McDonald 2000) from the National Gallery of Australia and you will have a great library for teaching and learning about perceptions and practices in Australia’s environmental history. From a Victorian perspective I would see the collection as a rich resource for VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies, and Environmental Science, and for parts of the Biology and Geography study designs. 📖

## References

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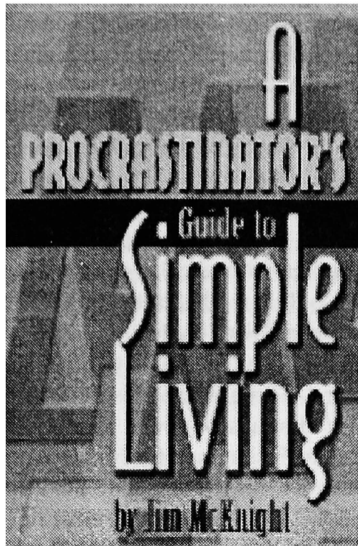
Jim McKnight, 2001, *A Procrastinator’s Guide to Simple Living*, Melbourne University Press, South Carlton, Victoria. ISBN 0 522 84969 5 Paperback 192 pp, RRP \$24.75.

As a fully paid up procrastinator I found this book tremendously helpful. I was late in sending this review to the editors, but not as late as it would have been had I not read the book. Enough said.

Jim McKnight’s guide provides much that is of interest to a procrastinator and a reviewer – because I am both. If you are serious about taking in its ideas it isn’t a quick read, but its contents will assist you in thinking about the problems faced by procrastinators and their friends and advisers when the former say they want to change. It also is an informative and, at times, inspirational source of sustenance towards changing

your behaviour if that's what you want to do.

McKnight, who was professor and head of department in psychology at the University of Western Sydney at the time of writing the *Guide*, has had considerable experience (both practical and as a researcher) in what used to be called 'alternative' lifestyles. Not surprisingly then, the book contains useful theoretical and practical insights.



However, nothing is perfect and some aspects of the book grate. One of them is his repeated reference to 'the green agenda' – as though there ever was such a unitary phenomenon – and to 'greens' and 'conventional' environmentalists. It and they apparently are responsible for more harm than good because they are 'fixated on government taking control of urgent problems and forcing people to change in ways which basically ignore our individuality' (p2), and because their worldview 'is utopian...[and about] retreating to a golden age... to some imagined pastoral age when time stood still' (p. 37). They exhibit a 'constant silliness that masquerades as political correctness. A tree-hugging, save-the-whales-while-riding-bicycles-eating-tofu worldview [which is] as mindless as the economic system it replaces.' (p. 38), and 'an eclectic pseudo-spirituality ...alienating much of an essentially materialistic public' (p. 43, note 21). Such references are present in several other places in the text and the otherwise wonderfully rich set of footnotes. What seems to be a need to erect a 'straw person' to knock down as a way of sustaining his own case might bring a few laughs in lectures but it is a major irritant in the book – and, given the strength of Jim McKnight's credentials and case, it's unnecessary.

There is a disquietingly inaccurate use of the word 'essential', as in the example above. Many would argue that to describe humans as 'essentially materialistic', as opposed to possessing some substantial need for experience other-than-material – 'religious', 'non-pseudo-spiritual' for example – is a breathtakingly loose use of the term 'essential'. Likewise, a previous passage in which he maintains that 'any account of human action should see technological innovation as an

essentially positive force' (p. 40 – italics added), obscures the essentially (here used intentionally!) double-edged sword of technology. Readers might refer to several works on this issue, such as Edward Tenner's *Why Things Bite Back: Predicting the Problems of Progress*. Jim McKnight's faith in technological answers to the issues that procrastinators procrastinate about appears at least as often as his distaste for things 'green' is voiced, beginning with this lead quote to chapter 1: 'The question is whether the technology that has extended our reach can now also ... transform the environment for the better.' (p. 1, italics added). It is highly contestable whether there is anything that is the question and, if there is, whether that is it! One might further be concerned that the notion of 'transform[ing] the environment for the better' isn't at least acknowledged as problematic. He also calls for 'a combination of high technology and even smarter social organisation' (p. 2) without detailing what they might be, asserts that 'our salvation lies in smarter, highly efficient and technological responses' (p. 13), that 'we will reach sustainability through a rapid technological evolution that will lift the pace of change beyond anything we have yet experienced (p. 36), and that 'the best way to this end ['the best allocation of resources to protect an already damaged ecosystem'] is to use appropriate(high) technologies'(p. 184). In this uncritical extolling of technology, and its unexamined Darth Vader side – as in his lambasting of 'the greens' – and his claims that much will be achieved by 'social engineering using market mechanisms' (p. 186), although his enthusiasm for the latter is qualified (p. 193), Jim McKnight unfortunately reads like an apologist for right wing think tanks sponsored by the likes of the Institute for Public Affairs. Readers are invited to consult Sharon Beder's *Global Spin* for further information about their contribution to procrastination! I'd hasten to add that I'm sure Jim McKnight is not an IPA mole – but they'd like to use some of his words.

Equally unfortunate is his rather self-contradictory applause for Wilfred Beckerman's *Small is Stupid*. This work, an obvious take on the well-known and admired *Small is Beautiful* by Ernst Schumacher, itself seen by the author to have considerable positive value for the conserver movement discussed in this book, is applauded on the grounds that *Small is Stupid* 'challenges much of the conventional wisdom of the environmental movement' [*there go those stupid greens again!*] and expos[es] their *sloppy thinking*' (p. 192, note19, italics and italicised comments added). Having on p. 39 praised a 'back-to-earth' community which 'had its children clad in lightweight cotton T-shirts cut by the mile in Hong Kong and sold for a pittance in the local supermarket' (with no reference to matters of 'fair trade' which have some considerable bearing on bringing sustainability to majority and minority worlds alike), Jim offers the following further pieces of particularly 'swifful thinking' on p. 40: 'we have learned how to create valuable resources out of previously useless materials – uranium and sewage sludge are examples' and 'whatever else might be said of nuclear energy [*maybe those other things are just a little critical*], the potential to create a large amount of energy from very little ore makes this an *attractive activity*' (italics and italicised comments added). That is a somewhat

limited analysis of the value of the nuclear industry.

There are some other minor confusions that McKnight's readers will need to sort out. For example, if it is true that 'we are presently over-governed and over-regulated' is it also true that 'many of the ecological problems we face will only be solved by strong centralised government' (p34)? If it is true that 'we need to become self-reliant' (p. 32), is it also useful that, as a result of 'international specialisation ... Each community trades its particular skills and labour and increasingly relies on other groups to produce necessities of life' (p. 40)? If it is true that 'our behaviour is largely still the same as it always was', is it also true that 'more and more people are creating less and less damage than they once did' (40)?

Finally, in this examination of the downsides of the *Guide*, it is again disquieting that McKnight offers, without any discussion of ethical stances, some comments and stories which even minimally ethical persons might want to examine. For example, there is the idea stated throughout the book that the best thing to do is to get in before the rush to a conserver lifestyle, to beat everyone else to a fair deal (p. 46); there is the scenario of 'impending scarcity and financial collapse' – 'This will be an unpleasant time to live... From this time of confusion, a guaranteed incomes policy will emerge' – as though that is, well, OK and future conservers should just let it happen.

Among these examples of ideas I think a reader should question and examine, certainly more closely than McKnight does in his book, are some gems of inspiration and practical assistance. Although there is no reference to Ted Trainer's considerable output (*Abandon Affluence*, for example) on frugality, simplicity and communality as important elements in attaining more sustainable lifestyles, the author makes these notions central in his statements about *what* procrastinators en route to sustainability ought to be aiming for and *how* they might attain those goals. The 'what' is informed by much useful material about shortcomings of present political, social and particularly economic. McKnight is on his strongest ground when discussing *how* behaviour change can be visualised and effected. He provides several useful 'prescriptions' and checklists to assist procrastinators understand what, or who, they are up against, that is, themselves. And he helps by reassuring us that we are pretty ordinary in our addiction – and that it is really a sign that we are frustrated and want to get going!

He describes 'The Conserver Way' – which again contains some inappropriate suggestions such as the relative unimportance of biodiversity (p. 11) as a suggestion completely at odds with contemporary discussions about ecosystem services, and equally so with a more comprehensive statement about the conserver worldview in the book's appendix. The perils of accumulated debt and evils of the practice of charging interest on borrowed money are dealt with at length and followed by a fairly direct series of 'do's and don'ts' about arranging one's personal finances. There is

some practical wisdom – and a compelling challenge – in that material!

In 'A Home of Our Own' case studies are provided, with comment, about some who have avoided the debt trap by using a variety of owner-builder strategies. Here, and in 'Towards Community', many of the accounts are of groups moving into peri-urban or semi-rural areas. The stories, and accompanying comments, are indeed useful – but some acknowledgment is necessary that such a form of urban expansion is difficult for many to attain, and hardly congruent with maintenance and repair of natural habitat. Further, it would have been appropriate to refer to the work of groups such as Urban Ecology and their efforts to establish intra-urban settlements which model sustainable urban consolidation.

Another of the book's criticisms of 'greens' is that 'the green agenda [sic] requires too radical a change for the ordinary [sic] person' (p. 2). It is my belief that many of McKnight's suggestions and checklists could be judged unfavourably under the same criterion! Fortunately there is an eminently practical chapter 'A Procrastinator's Guide to Alternative Realities'. The discussion here about the nature of procrastination, and the outline of ways through it, constitute probably the material most likely to be of use to environmental educators when they seek to enable learners to be effective actors *for* and *with* the environment. The final chapter, 'The Future' – in which prophet Jim foretells with engaging certainty the way things *will* be – and the appendix 'A Conserver Worldview', both contain ideas for learners to debate, and so are also useful.

Reading and discussing *A Procrastinator's Guide to Simple Living* would be a valuable activity for senior students and practitioners of environmental education alike. There is certainly material on which readers can whet their appetite for critique of proposals about sustainability – and there is much that will provide food for thought and avenues for further reading, as well as practical assistance to student and educator progressing along their professional and personal paths to sustainability. 🍌

## References

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