

A SORT OF SCIENTIST ON INSPIRING LANDSCAPES

Jamie Kirkpatrick

Jamie Kirkpatrick claims to have been 'largely incarcerated' in Melbourne until the age of 25. He then moved to Tasmania, working at the University of Tasmania long enough to have earned himself a gold watch. He has been Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at this institution since 1988. Jamie's professional life consists largely of lots of committees, forms and marking. When not working he likes to spend time in the bush or doing things in the garden with the poet (Christina). He likes to read, write, do research and help people learn. Jamie Kirkpatrick has published extensively, including nature writing and scientific works. The book with which he has most enjoyed being involved is the beautiful In The Forest by West Wind Press

There is a theory that the archetypal inspirational landscape is an atavistic one in which human beings can camp in glades, and glimpse lake, river or sea through shrubs and trees. This is almost my view now, from an artificial cave. Over a sere winter herbaceous bed, and through Norfolk pine, blackwood and horse chestnut trees, the Derwent Estuary ripples greily. On the other side of the Derwent the South Arm Peninsula presents a patchwork of dark bush and brown paddocks, its hills lying like beached whales, gazing longingly towards Antarctica. In the far distance I see similar hills, faint blue. These sit across another stretch of water, on the east of the Tasman Peninsula. There, Christina, the poet, and I, have temporary legal custody of the 100 Acre Wood, a block of dry bush centred on a ridge above one of the many Roaring Beaches of Tasmania.

On the day that we were introduced to the 100 Acre Wood, sea eagles circled overhead, waves shook the air, and southwesterly squalls striated Storm Bay, partly obscuring Bruny Island and the wilderness mountains in the distance. The landscape and bush are moulded by such squalls, with few signs of humanity. Yet simple dwellings hide among the trees, in a community that generally abjures electricity, clearing and logging, and hopes to keep its habitat harmonious.

I frequently drive to the north of Tasmania, and back, along the 'Heritage Highway'. I know that I have returned to my country at Spring Hill, where a small stand of Tasmanian blue gum signifies a descent into intimate valleys among rounded hills, with the Wellington Range almost, but not quite, achieving cragginess in the background.

There is a type of inspiration that derives from the process of growing into, and knowing, a landscape. Adrian Bowden, his father and I, once stopped in the pub at Ouse, on our way back to what passes for civilisation from a research trip in the wilderness. The Bowden family originally came from Ouse, which sits in a dry valley in inland Tasmania that has obviously suffered considerably from the European invasion. Over a few hills from Ouse lies another, more attractive, small town in another, more attractive, dry valley, named Bothwell. Adrian struck up conversation with one of the older locals, who found it difficult to believe that anyone would want to leave Ouse: 'Been here all my life. Went to Bothwell once. Did not like it much.' While I am not quite as parochial in my sources of inspiration from the landscape as the man from Ouse, my writing flows best in the context of those parts of my country where landscape harmony has been least destroyed and where I have an intimate knowledge of its patterns and moods.

As a geographer and ecologist I know landscapes in a way that most people do not. I suffer from temporal depth and temporal projection. I cannot stop myself from seeing the signs of degraded bush, the creeping erosion and salinisation in the paddocks, the real estate signs that presage the construction of angular Neobrutalist monuments to human endeavour, the pink tape that marks the prospective doom of centuries old trees, the shells and charcoal that mark the past lives of a brutally depleted people. I occasionally find myself crying at the many signs of the punishment we have inflicted, and will inflict, on

our land and its inhabitants. On the other hand, I can perceive the products of fire and tempest as part of the yin and yang of the bush. I can even envisage the landscape after growth societies based on fossil fuels pass away, or even after all people pass away. The poet who I love seems to me to perceive landscapes in a different way, through a temporal force field of accumulated emotion, the darkness of places of evil, the rejection of places of masculinity, and the acceptance of places with a palimpsest of female pleasure.

I have a platonic love for gardens, landscapes writ small. Gardens integrate the natural and the artefactual. Even the most anally retentive of gardeners is never totally in charge of their plants, or those of our relatives that eat them, no matter how much they confine them in concrete circles in a sea of white pebbles. The gardens that most inspire me are at the more natural end of the continuum that ends in the artefactual. The gardener plants in hope, gratefully accepts any, usually unexpected, aesthetic rewards that eventuate, and tries to ameliorate the aesthetic disasters. In old gardens of this kind the plants meld into each other, and the environment.

Like the gardens that most please me, the landscapes that most inspire me have harmony in space and time. This does not mean that they necessarily have colour combinations that would have pleased Gertrude Jekyll. Some sunsets I have seen are quite tasteless by many standards, eighties decorator grey and apricot. Harmony is deep adjustment to continuing processes. It is independent to some extent from rates of change. Coastal sand dunes are constantly changing, as is their wont; attempted stabilisation brings landscape disharmony. The ancient quartzite-dominated landscapes of southwest Tasmania can only be disharmoniously degraded by quarry and road cutting; stability violated.

There is a fitting rate and periodicity of change for individual landscapes and their components. This fitting change is more cyclic than linear. The cliffs may erode in a seemingly linear fashion, but the beds in the rocks that constitute them presage the beds in future cliffs, created from the products of their erosion.

This cyclicity, stability among change, can evidence itself in cultural, as well as natural, landscapes: the almost organic growth and maintenance of Georgian farm buildings and their gardens despite crumbling sandstone and dying individual trees; crops followed by fallow on fertile river flats; mixtures of field and forest long adjusted to topography; even the ever-evolving tangle of steaming and rusting pipes and boilers in the Electrolytic Zinc plant. However, most cultural landscapes in Australia could only be inspirational to the growth people, who value simplification in the process of linear change because it produces more for them in the very short term, or exhibits how very good they have been at making money.

At this point in this narrative I have developed the feeling that the landscapes that most facilitate my creativity and give me most pleasure are those with an internal harmony that have formed a substantial part of my existence. There now arises the question: are there qualities of such landscapes that make some even more exceptionally inspirational than others?

In 1999 in *Landscape and Urban Planning*, in a dry, academic article parsimoniously entitled 'Assessing temporal changes in the reservation of the natural aesthetic resource using pictorial content analysis and a grid-based scoring system - the example of Tasmania', Louise Mendel and I reported the results of scoring the types of scenes that were found in photographic representations of Tasmanian natural landscapes between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century. The photographs were dominated by scenes of high relative relief and/or those containing water. The proportions of photographs containing each of these elements were constant over the century. Landscape romanticism reigned.

Between 1972, when I first lived in Tasmania, and the present (2002) I have managed to have at least a few days of research fieldwork in the high mountains of Tasmania each summer. In the quest for alpine vegetation data I have walked excessively long distances with excessively heavy packs, and occasionally even risked helicopters. I have clung to rock faces, with lakes hundreds or metres, and one or two bounces, below. I have stood on

craggy summits, with arrays of snaggle-toothed peaks fading into the far distance. I have camped by mountain lakes so remote that the native cats were unafraid to beg for food. I have wandered for days over the undulating Central Plateau, to see lake after lake between quadrats, but not much in the way of relative relief. I have been very well exposed to water, cliffs and Gothic landscapes. The alpine landscapes I remember most fondly are all not overly marred by fire or human trampling, but, among the many such places, they tend not to be those that are precipitous, nor those well-endowed with water features. The subtle complexities in the details of the landscape stimulate me. Water and rock faces are a bit gross and dull for my tastes. I find waterfalls less interesting than herbfields, or string bogs, or mosaic bolster heaths. It might be different if I were a stream ecologist, or a geologist.

Surprisingly, for one who has done more than his fair share of sincere celebration of the alpine, rainforest and tall tree landscapes of the western Tasmanian wilderness, I find more inspiration in the dry eucalypt forests, grassy woodland, heaths and tussock grassland of the topographically gentle east of the State than I do in the wilderness west. Gothic scenes with vegetation reminiscent of an English garden seems to me to be the landscape equivalent of commercial television. The gentler, more complex, more pastel, more untidy, more biologically rich, Australian landscape is not even the SBS equivalent, but equal to a good book by an open fire.

I have been privileged to be involved in the processes that led to the declaration of two world heritage areas in Australia, those related to western Tasmania and the Blue Mountains. In both cases the IUCN assessor on the precursor field trips was a lovely and dedicated North American mountain man. Jim Thorsell was not particularly impressed by the beautiful, and globally unusual, Tasmanian mountains, with their lack of height, ice and crumble, but enthused on the wild south coast. We sat together on a sandstone rock in the middle of the Blue Mountains wilderness, eucalypt clad plateaus receding to the horizon in a blue pastel light. Not to his taste; Jim just wanted to talk about rainforests and glaciers!

Landscapes are spatially defined integrals of sections of continua of biodiversity, geodiversity and cultural diversity (I am a scientist after all). If one accepts the argument that diversity is worth keeping, then it is just as valuable to keep the red longitudinal dune landscape of the desert, with its richness of ants and lizards among its bizarre hummock grasses, as it is to keep the crumbling peaks and glaciers of the Himalayas. If one takes a representative approach to landscape conservation, that desert landscape is far more valuable than the Himalayas. If the Himalayas disappeared through a hole in the space-time continuum, like one of each pair of my socks, there would be plenty of other similar mountain regions left. There is only one Australian desert; only one real Roaring Beach.

If we are classifying landscapes as worthy, or not worthy, of maintaining in harmony, as is presumably the ultimate painful point of this essaying exercise, should we conserve those landscapes that appeal to most people, or those that most appeal to those with the most developed tastes in landscapes, or both. Personally, I believe that all our landscapes should be allowed to revert to, or maintain, their harmony, but that, if we persist with our foolish growthist habits, a representational approach to the conservation of landscape aesthetic values is the way to go, with a concentration on those landscapes that are most peculiarly and characteristically Australian. Such an approach would inevitably reflect high, more than low, taste, while not totally rejecting the low.