

OUR LANDSCAPES

Stephen Martin

Stephen Martin B.A., Dip.Lib, M. Sc. Soc., is a writer and researcher fascinated by people's response to the landscape and those elements, such as wildlife that attract people's attention. His relevant publications include A new land, European perceptions of Australia 1788-1850 (1993) and A history of Antarctica (1996). He is currently researching for a book on the many ways through which people have perceived and idealised the albatross.

To breathe is both unconscious and reflective – it is a defining act of life. So what makes us stop and take a breath at a particular place or landscape? Is there something recognisable in the lie of the land or in the way we see it? When is that catch of the mind or eye enough? What generates further interest, forms a covenant or becomes an obsession?

It's about people and the lifetimes of seeing and thinking, moving and learning and classifying, associating and differentiating becoming part of that view. As our familiarity grows, representations of that sight and its afterthoughts – the writings, dreams and images, grow a life of their own. Eventually these responses become part of the language of that land.

Some of the most interesting examples of this relationship can be seen in the experiences of Europeans exploring Australia.

On Saturday 19 July 1873 William Christie Gosse, while exploring the centre of Australia, saw what appeared to be a hill with holes near the top. On closer inspection he saw to his 'astonishment ... one immense rock rising abruptly from the plain; the holes I had noticed were caused by water in some places forming immense caves', he later wrote. He named it Ayers Rock. The next day he rode around the base of the rock, found a spring that he named Maggies' Spring and 'after walking and scrambling two miles barefooted, over sharp rocks, succeeded in reaching the summit, and had a view that repaid me for my trouble ... The top is covered with small holes in the rock, varying in size ... all partly filled with water. Mt Olga must be twenty miles west. Some low ranges and ridges west-north-west, one of which I think must be McNicol's Range; part of a lake visible, bearing north Mt Conner 96°, and high ranges south-east, south, and south west, with sandhills between.' Gosse saw with an analytical eye, surveying the lie of the land for later exploration and mapping. He continued 'This seems to be a favourite resort of the natives in the wet season, judging from the numerous camps in every cave. ... They amuse themselves covering these with all sorts of devices – some of them snakes, very cleverly done, others of two hearts joined together; and in one I noticed a drawing of a creek with an emu track going along the centre. I shall have more time to examine these when the main camp is here. This rock is certainly the most wonderful natural feature I have ever seen.'

Gosse and his party continued their explorations and on Monday 28 July were back at Ayers Rock. He wrote 'this rock appears more wonderful every time I look at it, and I may say it is a sight worth riding over eighty-four miles of spinifex sands to see'. On 1 August Gosse wrote that 'The rock presented a grand appearance this morning; close to our camp was a waterfall about 200 feet high, the water coming down in one sheet of foam.'

When Gosse stood on the top of Uluru and watched in wonder at its waterfalls, the experience was truly inspirational. It remains so. The 'rock', as it is popularly known, has become one of Australia's most enduring and unifying symbols. Uluru and its surrounding landscape is a symbolic heart to most Australians, revered by its Aboriginal custodians, and a place of tourist visitation from places around the world. Gosse's record of those few days of discovery and examination is indicative of our most significant shared perceptions of a unique landscape. It encompasses the scientific, the European explorer and the Aboriginal.

Sixty two years after Gosse stood on the top of Ayers Rock, Australian anthropologist Charles Mountford wrote that he was 'so impressed with the intense beauty and vast size

[of Ayers Rock] that I set myself the task of making a survey of all phases of Aboriginal life associated with this wonderful feature.' Mountford's work has become one of the most respected and substantial contributions to European understanding of Aboriginal Uluru. Others have followed in this work. Barry Hill for example published *The Rock: travelling to Uluru* a remarkable personal interpretation of the region and its meanings in 1994.

Of course the traditional owners continue their interpretation and maintenance of Aboriginal explanations through their contact with visitors who come to this unique geological and spiritual landscape.

Uluru and its surrounds serve as a model for the approaches to preservation and landscape assessment. It is significant to European and Aboriginal cultures. It's a landscape of potential and a symbol of both modern and ancient culture. It's a central motif of the mystery and beauty of the Australian interior and a geographical, emotional and spiritual point of reference. It is a site of continuing scientific interest and explanation.

About twenty years ago, I climbed to the top of the MacDonnell Ranges at a spot just outside Alice Springs. It was mid winter and despite this and the fact that it was evening, it was hot, and the climb – if that is the correct word for such a low range, was hard work.

There was no defined track and, as I moved up to the top, over orange-red boulders, past clumps of dry green spinifex and shrubs, over tiny dry waterways and under the limited shade of ghost gums, I noticed ants in the cracks of rocks, lizards scurried out of my way. Above, kites circled in the air. For all I knew they saw me as potential carrion.

I was aware of the Aboriginal lore of the place, the European history of this beautiful range, and its geological age, but quite frankly after half an hour it didn't matter one jot. Occasionally I'd lift my head and look at the view but I wasn't too interested at this point.

Sweat seeped from my hair and down my back. It ran down into my eyes and stung. It soaked into my shirt and soon great wet patches grew outwards from my under-arms and the centre of my back. Flies landed on my wet forehead and drank. My thighs began to burn with the effort of stepping up and over the rocks and my back ached with the effort. My hands were scratched from grabbing at rocks and shrubs to steady myself or from pulling on them to further myself up the climb.

When I reached the top, exhausted, my heart banging and legs a little wobbly, I drank from the water bottle. Never does water taste so good and fresh as after a climb like that. It goes down the throat in a rush of cool and refreshment. Senses heightened but functioning more normally, I could look and think about the landscape.

At first sight the view, with its vastness and beauty was something of a shock. As I looked more closely it became wonderful. The range, old, red-orange and rounded, almost denuded of earth, stretched away to the north. Ghost gums, all skinny white trunks and dark green leaves, dotted the range. The land to the east seemed to stretch away forever. Immediately below lay Alice Springs and through it 'ran' the Todd River, with its accompanying green border of trees. Roads marked out patterns of transport and occupation. Away in the distance I could see the pearl like domes of the Pine Gap United States spy facility.

That moment and that scene are now gone. For all I know there may now be a track to the top of the spot on which I stood.

In contrast to Gosse's report, mine is a uniquely personal account of a landscape. My knowledge of the history, nature and politics of the place enlarged my experience of landscape. While linked to a geographical reality, it was intertwined with a sense of community and shared understandings.

There is much in common between desert and Antarctic landscapes – the openness, vastness and lack of human reference points - that inspire awe and curiosity. These landscapes are geographical realities, and our memories of them are coloured by experience and history. Often they remain with us as treasured memories.

Many of us also hold an idealised landscape within us. Sometimes based on nothing more than textual descriptions or images, these may even become shared through common action, such as the efforts to preserve wilderness.

I once met Greenpeace organiser Lyn Goldsworthy, and we talked about the need to preserve Antarctica and its unique landscapes, many of which are significant to Australians and their history of visiting the continent. She wants Antarctica preserved because; 'it is in a pristine wilderness, because it is a zone of peace in a world of conflict; because it is mysterious in its isolation and inaccessibility; because we live our daily lives in an overcrowded and polluted world; Antarctica is gaining a special place in people's hearts.'

The American writer Wallace Stegner also wrote about the wilderness as an idealised, internalised landscape: 'We need wilderness preserved ... The reminder and assurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there – important, that is simply as an idea. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.'

Through interpretations and experiences, landscapes can remind us of our past, our potential and our place in the world. We can look at the mythical, the historical, the artistic and the scientific views. Despite the essential fact that all landscapes change, we can protect landscapes of significance, we can make them reserves and parks, we can protect their defining characteristics such as river and ridge-lines and geological formations. By preserving wilderness we can protect a landscape of scientific or spiritual value.

Most of us have stopped and looked at a landscape. We've probably been taken by the spectacle of the view or an unusual feature, or the knowledge of a significant event that happened there. We'll sometimes wonder at the history of the place, or think about its wildlife, geology or ecology. We may recognise something – if it's a favourite place we'll feel comfortable and rewarded. Often this is enough. Sometimes the stories about a place will have greater meaning, or more significance than those of other places and these cultural associations enrich our understandings and experience of the landscape.

Our responses to a landscape - the catch and its aftermath – have in common shared symbols and descriptions and stories. Landscapes and the shared and respected perceptions they evoke form a conspiracy of understanding.

And that's worth keeping.

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