

Introduction to George Seddon

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George Seddon (b. 1927) is Professorial Associate, Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, Department of English, University of Western Australia. In an era of "specialists without spirit", and of enterprise universities creating territory to ensure their fitness to survive, Seddon is that rare and endangered species that Thomas Carlyle once dubbed as "Professor of Things-in-General". He is one of the best known and revered Australian scholars of environmental studies having penned pioneering studies in regional geography, environmental history, and literary criticism, aesthetics and landscape.

Seddon was initially trained in English language and literature at The University of Melbourne (1950) In 1956 upon returning from several years freelance travelling and teaching at universities in Europe, Canada and the United States, what he calls a "customary bigfella walkabout", Seddon was appointed to a lectureship in English Literature at The University of Western Australia. He discovered, much to his initial disgust, that the local bush was nothing like what he had grown to love in his home state of Victoria in South-east Australia. Never one to disown his emotions or putting them aside without reflection, Seddon enrolled in undergraduate biological and earth sciences while carrying a full academic research, teaching and administrative load in the English Department. Such was his new found interest in the Swan Coastal Plain that he wrote two books on the subject and completed his Masters of Science and doctoral thesis in geology at the University of Minnesota (1964-66). Across five decades he has held Chairs in four different disciplines (English, UWA; Geology, Oregon; History and Philosophy of Science, UNSW; Environmental Science, Melbourne) and taught at universities in Lisbon, Toronto, Bologna, Rome, Venice, Minnesota, and Oregon in addition to Melbourne, Sydney and Perth in Australia. He initiated programs in the philosophy of science at The University of Western Australia (1966-1970) and taught history and philosophy of science at The University of New South Wales, Sydney (1971-1974). He initiated new programs in environmental studies and Landscape Architecture at The University of Melbourne where he was first appointed founding Director of The Centre for Environmental Studies (1974-1982), later becoming Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Planning (1982-1987). He also officially launched the journal *Landscape Australia* (1977 -).

Not only has Seddon crossed the disputed turfs and boundaries of academic professions, disciplines and departments but he has made a career out of working beyond the academy in community, regional and government consultancies and studies. At The University of Melbourne between 1974 and 1987, Seddon undertook studies on environmental assessment, landscape perception, urban design and conservation planning. He was particularly good at working at the complex intersections of nature-society struggles and debates. He took an avid interest in the contested terrains between metropolitan suburbs and arable agricultural hinterlands, or wilderness areas in key built-up population areas. He studied the development and routing of major power stations and transmission lines through ecologically and socially sensitive areas, the energy and infrastructure needs of national parks, and bicycle plans for cities. In 1979, with Ross King and Jeremy Pike he also wrote the first suburban history of its kind in Australia on Hawthorn, a significant Victorian era middle class and middle ring suburb in Melbourne. His enthusiasm for local history and cultural heritage found expression in his loving restoration of houses in which he has lived in Melbourne and Fremantle. He has combined this with a landscape ecologist's imaginative flair for garden design that incorporates native and exotic plants suited to local climate and soil conditions. One should not overlook his many practical handbooks and guides to vegetable gardens, historical and cultural heritage walks and house restoration.

Seddon as both regionalist and cosmopolitan is living testimony to the inadequacy of such dichotomous notions that to be regionalist is to suffer from volk yokel strains of communitarianism

while to be a cosmopolitan is to necessarily seek the empty non-places of airport lounges and international hotels. Seddon's international reach in his various intellectual labours is as much extensive as it is a reflection of his sharp sense of place. For a good example - in addition to the collected essays below - see his essay on his 'Return to Portugal' collected in *Best Australian Essays 1998* (Melbourne, Bookman Press). He has undertaken regional and urban planning consultancies in such locales as Texas, China and Italy. In his study of Venice he demonstrates a typically acute awareness of the unintended consequences of human interventions on the environment, at one and the same time a love of unpicking common sense or paradigmatic views of cause and effects. In this case, Seddon questions the popular hypothesis that Venice is sinking by uncovering more specific human made causes of subsidence, namely, the unintended impacts of post-war dredging of ship canals coupled with the infilling of the landward margins of the lagoon.

Seddon is a superb stylist whose best metier is perhaps the essay, the review and the lecture podium where he can combine and share with others his acerbic wit, erudition, and critical enthusiasm in equal measure. As befitting his pragmatic, historical and comparative proclivities, his love of languages and landscapes, and his multi-disciplinary and multi-generic corpus of writings, Seddon rarely stops to spell out the conceptual underpinnings of his thinking. Nevertheless the lineaments of a social theory of landscape and society can be discerned in the way in which he builds historical and textual sociologies of perception. His thought is important for his central and consistent emphasis on holding two critical insights as true. First, that all human experience of nature is already inscribed by human language and past experiences contained in our language. Second, such has been the extent, range and long history of human impact on nature we must increasingly value nature for its own sake over against the stakes and interests of humans. Against new world eco-centric environmentalists, Seddon details the myriad ways in which even the most wild and remote margins of planet earth have been perceived, imagined and shaped by humans. Against the anthropocentric proclivities of economic politicians and political economists, Seddon has explored the infinite and diverse otherness of natural ecosystems in which humans must perforce find their habitus.

The following essay is an exemplary thought-piece on one such remote region of northwest Australia. Seddon re-narrates the process and self-understandings of perceiving the Pilbara by European explorers, missionaries, miners and pastoralists through to our own contemporary journeys across the terrain in aesthetic, scientific and technological reappropriations of place and space. As these most recent explorations and imaginings unfold, Seddon gently leads the reader to appreciate the enduring presence of Aboriginal inscriptions and practices over at least forty thousand years even as he concludes that we still haven't done yet with *Terra Australis Incognita*. And we might add that we hope too that Seddon is not done yet with helping us rethink nature and our languages of nature on and at its antipodean margins, and elsewhere, everywhere.

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