

Clarke, Philip, 2003. *Where the Ancestors Walked. Australia as an Aboriginal Landscape*. Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, XII + 282 pp., ISBN 1 74114 070 6. Reviewed by Rosemarie Gläser, Dresden

The author of this monograph, Philip Clarke, has a unique multiple qualification for presenting Australia's indigenous culture, past and present, and the dangers to which it is exposed:

First, as a field worker in Central and Northern Australia he gained rich experience of the indigenous people's use of plants, their strong links to their land, their careful exploitation of the natural resources, and their respect for the environment – observations which resulted in his subsequent academic studies on the cultural geography of South Australia.

Second, as a curator of the valuable ethnological collections of Aboriginal artefacts and as Head of Anthropology and Manager of Sciences at the South Australian Museum in Adelaide, he had access to the wealth of the material and spiritual indigenous culture, which became the foundation of his systematic investigations.

Third, as a relative of the Ngarrindjeri people, the indigenous residents in the Lower Murray region, South Australia, where the author married an Aboriginal woman from the community in Point McLeay, he developed a deep sympathy for the alienation of the Aborigines from their land and the loss of their cultural traditions and identity across Australia, but also with their current struggle for their "native title" and a better way of life.

It is this professional expertise and personal background that distinguishes Philip Clarke's book from similar introductions to Aboriginal history and culture. His commitment to the Aboriginal cause can be felt throughout the text, particularly in passages where he gives a personal account of events or comments on the present-day situation.

In the preface the author elaborates the key term "cultural landscape" as understood by cultural geographers. There is general agreement that the cultural landscape is "the product of a culture modifying the land it occupies" and "an expression of how people engage with their world, how they create explanations for and experiences of their surroundings". Thus, "cultural landscapes are not only the outcome of economic activity, material culture and settlement patterns, but of the attitudes and perceptions about that landscape of those living in it. The land and the people who live upon it are deeply entwined (...)" (p. IX).

This statement in fact encapsulates the author's aim and underpins his intention to prove that Aboriginal culture cannot be correctly understood from a prejudiced European angle and a narrow view of the indigenous people's perfect adaptation to the seemingly hostile Australian environment, of their rich spirituality and their sophisticated art forms. Therefore, the author rejects the still deep-rooted European argument that Australian Aborigines were at a primitive stage of development when they encountered British colonisation.

The book is composed of four parts. In part I, "Origins of Aboriginal Australia", the author presents familiar, but also hitherto unknown facts in a broad anthropological setting and compares the early culture on the Australian continent with simultaneous developments on the islands in the Pacific, as well as in China and in Europe. The geographical conditions contributed to shaping "religious landscapes" (p. 15ff.). These are associated with the complex concept of "Dreaming" for which indigenous tribes have coined different words which designate highly differentiated myths. Thus, tracks and "dreaming strings", the "Skyworld and Underworld" (p. 25 ff.) play an important part in Aboriginal stories and helped to consolidate the mutual bonds of the people. The author also discusses the structure of social life; marriage rules resulting from Aboriginal kin classifications; totemic beliefs; the languages used; the education of children; gender, age and taboos, and the status of clans and tribes.

Part II, "Materials of Culture", deals with methods of hunting and gathering; the preparation and distribution of food; the making of tools and weapons; the habits of fire-making and cooking, etc. The artefacts described relate to the South Australian Ngarrindjeri people with whom the author is closely familiar. A separate chapter introduces art forms of the Dreaming as found in rock shelters in Western and Central Australia; the techniques and the colour material used (e.g. the dot painting tradition in the Western Desert); bark painting; sculptures on the Tiwi Islands and performance art as dance ceremonies.

Part III, focused on "Regional Differences", describes the activities of Aborigines as traders and harvesters of natural fruit according to their "seasonal calendars". The author gives detailed accounts of Aboriginal lifestyles in the South, the Central Deserts and in the North, "beyond Capricorn".

Part IV, "Cultural Change", raises a number of topical questions, starting with the first contacts between Aboriginal culture in the north with European explorers and settlers, but also with Torres Strait Islanders and Papuans, and finally the traumatic consequences for the Aborigines of the European settlement and their loss of land. The author elaborates the influence of European words on indigenous languages, the adoption of new food habits and, on the other hand, the appreciation of indigenous artefacts by Europeans. He concludes with the remark that modern Aboriginal identity is a complicated process (p. 223). The final note sounds optimistic: "(...) geographically remote Aboriginal communities have retained much of their pre-European customs and traditions. What varies across Australia is the extent to which Aboriginal people have been able to control this relationship. (...) Aboriginal identity survives if the self-identifying group believes that continuity has taken place. (...) The land and the people on it are locked in an endless cycle of change. The Australian landscape, as a human artefact, bears witness to the cultural changes upon in" (p. 226).

Philip Clarke's book is convincingly structured and written in a clear, intelligible style. It includes numerous historical monochrome photographs from the archives of the Adelaide museum, and several specimens of Aboriginal seasonal calendars from different parts of Australia. Each chapter is supplemented by a large number of endnotes in the appendix. The bibliography ("References") covers 25 pages and

chiefly includes publications since the late 1970s on a wide range of topics. The book concludes with a joint name and subject index.

In summary, Philip Clarke's monograph sheds fresh light on many relevant aspects of Aboriginal culture and presents the reader with an encyclopaedic survey of Aboriginal life, which is both illuminating and insightful. It is a very special experience offering instruction, enjoyment and a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal landscape.