

Ross Gibson, 2002. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. University of Queensland Press, 183pp., plus notes and bibliography. ISBN 0-7022-3349-8. A\$ 19,95

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Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* was written at the height of Australia's so-called 'history wars' and is implicated in these historiographical debates which, for now over a decade, have occupied Australian historians, politicians and public intellectuals. After a new generation of historians had published increasingly critical accounts of the nation's colonial beginnings from the 1970s onwards, these studies came under attack in the early 1990s when conservative commentators such as popular historian Geoffrey Blainey characterised them as politically biased 'black armband history' (Blainey 1993, 15). Blainey's contribution, in particular, has since been taken up by Prime Minister John Howard whose campaign for a 'balanced' view of Australian history began with his election in 1996. Looking back on these discussions in his latest Australia Day address, Howard claimed to have finally won this historiographic 'war', since "compared with a decade ago, fewer Australians are ashamed of this nation's past." Howard "welcome[d] this corrective in our national sense of self" and moved on to open fire on a new front: he criticised the "fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues'", as well as the lack of "structured narrative" in high school history curricula and, by implication, historical writing in general (Howard 2006).

A number of historians of Australia's colonial past, however, insist on the impossibility of ever attaining such a structured narrative. Historical records from the nation's beginnings, they argue, at best only render half the story and remain notoriously silent about the violence and brutality that characterised the Australian 'frontier'. Anthropologist WEH Stanner had first addressed this "great Australian silence" in his 1968 ABC Boyer lectures and explained the striking absence of an Aboriginal perspective in colonial history to be not simply a matter of forgetting but "a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape" (Stanner 1969, 7). According to Ann Curthoys, this wilful and structural amnesia had begun with Federation as white Australian nationalism flourished and is only being addressed in recent texts which seek to recover already 'forgotten' histories (Curthoys 2003).

But how does knowledge of colonial violence survive if it was either never recorded or its evidence subsequently erased from the archives? A number of recent texts such as Peter Read's *Haunted Earth* and Maria Tumarkin's *Traumascapes* suggest that knowledge of this past is linked to particular landscapes and preserved in place names such as Murdering Gully or Massacre Bay, as well as local stories about these sites. Ian Clark's *Scars in the Landscape* from 1995 sought to record this type of local knowledge for Western Victoria. One of the sites described by Clark, Bells Falls, also featured in an exhibit at the re-designed Australian National Museum in Canberra which came under harsh attack by conservative historian Keith Windschuttle after its opening in 2001. Windschuttle's critique of the Bells Falls display exemplifies the contemporary difficulties and controversies historical writing about Australia's colonial past faces. In spite of claims by local white

settlers and indigenous people that the Falls had been the site of a massacre, he maintains that such knowledge was "worthless" since not supported by historical records and accused historians and the museum of inventing 'doctored evidence'. Windschuttle argues that "countless rural communities ... tell similar stories about spectacular local landmarks [and]...those with very high waterfalls seem to almost irresistibly conjure up myths that have an uncanny similarity wherever they are found." (Windschuttle 2003, 108).

outlined here. Similarly to the museum's curators, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* is concerned with the link between colonial violence, its commemoration and particular landscapes. Contrary to Windschuttle and Howard however, Gibson does not believe that such an account can rely on colonial records alone and that it should be rendered in a 'structured narrative'. Moreover, it is precisely Windschuttle's observation that 'countless rural communities' tell stories of colonial violence linked to particular landmarks that is of interest for his argument. "Sceptics can object that these slaughter accounts are merely yarns massed around without proof," Gibson concedes. "But this ignores how seriously oral cultures (white as well as black) regard their environments and their narratives" (68). Instead, he regards such narratives as 'generic': "[a]ll over the Australian frontier, stories like it have been placed in the landscape" (67-68). Gibson's fictocritical narrative – as the cover blurb informs us: "part road movie, part personal memoir, part murder mystery" – explores such a landscape and describes a particular road that runs through "a vast and sparse section of Australia's Pacific coast, ... known in popular legend as 'the Horror Stretch' – a place you're warned not to go" (1). It is an area, writes Gibson, where "[w]hatever colonialism was and is, it has made this place unsettled and unsettling" (2). Here, the land itself somehow seems to have gone bad from layer upon layer of brutal history.

Already in 1980, Bernard Smith had addressed such sensations about Australian landscapes in his lecture *The Spectre of Truganini* and suggested the nation was haunted by the dispossession and violence done to Aborigines. It is "a nightmare to be thrust out of mind," Smith wrote. "Yet like the traumatic experiences of childhood it continues to haunt our dreams" (Smith 1980, 17). Brisbane-born Gibson now investigates this 'spectre' with regard to North Queensland's Horror Stretch. "Most cultures contain prohibited or illicit spaces," he observes, "but no-go zones are especially compelling within *colonial societies*," "within regimes that have been formed by land-grabbing" (Gibson 2002^a, 15; 2002^b). Working downwards through the decades like an archaeologist, he describes this landscape as shaped by farmers who foolishly chopped down the brigalow and went broke growing wheat; by the hideous abuse and killings of violently dispossessed Aboriginal people; by the kidnapping and slavery of Melanesians to work the sugar cane; by the chemicals used on this landscape; by the numerous murders in this isolated rural area. In the story of the Horror Stretch thus unearthed, Gibson identifies the following recurring topics:

rootlessness and poverty-stricken itinerancy; the imposition of imported law; the geography of vastness, deluge, heat and erosion; the rural culture of firearms; a landscape composed of devolving ecologies; the mind-altering pressures of isolation; nervous, nocturnal predation; prejudice and violence visited upon Aborigines; sex grabbed perfunctorily and illicitly; regionalist resentments; migrations impelled by the shove of hopelessness and bitterness, rather than the allure of optimism. (49)

Contrary to Windschuttle who would snub such stories as mere 'fabrication', Gibson asks exactly what creates and maintains such memories and what functions they might fulfil for the former settler colony. Why are these themes, which would have been characteristic of most of Australia's colonial past, solely attributed to certain areas? According to Gibson, no-go zones such as the Horror Stretch create spaces where the "unruly and the unknown can be named and contained even if they cannot be annihilated" (178). The very fact that a "special 'quarantine-zone' exists ... tends to guarantee that everywhere else outside the cordon can be defined ... as well-regulated, social and secure" (173).

For Gibson, a close examination rather than avoidance of Australia's badlands is therefore vital. He places hope in their potential to disturb Australians into recognising the failings of their troubled past, the "issues that we wish we could deny, ignore or forget" (179). Drawing onto Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich's examination of German society after WWII, Gibson contends that such troubling memories require a psychoanalytical reading. He reiterates the Mitscherlich's claim that the "shadow of denial and repression of events ... cannot be undone by acts of forgetting" (quoted on p. 159) but has to be redressed with 'mourning work' in order for the post-traumatic society to attain independence from its past. Gibson reasons analogously that Australia "might attain maturity only when it learns to include an array of ethnic, psychological, differences [currently projected onto the badlands] in its constitution" (165). Only then might a true sense of belonging for non-indigenous Australians be achieved and – Gibson closes his study on an imaginary beach on the Capricorn coast – "you might fancy you can hear the shells whispering a thousand words for 'home' every time a wave washes out" (183).

Seven Versions of an Australian Badland provides a new and challenging perspective on Australian landscapes and Gibson's fictocritical style of writing befits its subject of haunted spaces. At times, however, a more analytical approach to how certain places attain their 'spectre' would have been beneficial. Instead, Gibson shifts within the space of a few pages from attributing animate qualities to the place itself – "[T]he Capricorn hinterland behaves like a live thing ... something outstretching human control and interpretation." (177) – to the notion that these characteristics are culturally ascribed onto the landscape: "the place has come into focus as a mythological badland, a ... location where malevolence is *simply there* partly because it has long been *imagined there*" (178). Gibson's attention to the importance of particular places for the commemoration of historical events however, as well as his interest in German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, reveal interesting parallels between his work and recent German writing on 'Gedächtnisorte' (see, for instance, Francois and Schulze 2001, Assmann 2002). It is highly recommendable for anyone interested in the fields of memory, commemoration and reconciliation.

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