

Made to Measure: Surveyors and Spatial History

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Boundary Markers: Land Surveying and the Colonisation of New Zealand,
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BOUNDARY MARKERS IS AN INTERSECTION POINT for a number of different dialogues in contemporary cultural landscape writing. Giselle Byrnes thinks global and acts local in terms of the navigation between overarching theories and their expression within the New Zealand context. The work is part of an emerging discipline of 'spatial history' following the work of Australian writer and artist, Paul Carter. Byrnes defines spatial history as "a study of how land has been transformed and of how colonisation is and has been expressed through language, drawing on the work of land surveyors as particular example" (p 5). At the same time as it localises general theories, *Boundary Markers* also offers something back to the broader sphere of thinking on cultural landscape, as there are strong resonances between the New Zealand experience and that of other postcolonial nations, particularly Australia.

Byrnes also plots an intersection between the extreme relativism of deconstruction and the uncritical perspectives of older empirical histories. She explicitly charts a path that navigates between the notion of landscape as text, and the realisation that landscapes are also social spaces. Another intersection is between oral and text-based cultures, noting how much of the surveyors' work is driven by the print paradigm (see p 116), for example, to "see the so-called discoveries of Brunner and his companions as simply a confirmation of the mental map which already existed in Kahu's head" (p 116).

'Text' is used both literally and metaphorically in Byrnes's work. The most explicit landscape text used by the surveyors is that of place naming. The contrast between the grain of Maori and European naming of the land is discussed by Byrnes, and this distinction has strong parallels in a range of colonised countries. Comparisons with other cultural practices would have served further to contextualise the New Zealand experience. For example, George Seddon writes that in Australia, "Our names are scattered thin on the landscape, whereas Aborigines had names for every feature ... Thus the net in which we have landed our catch is very coarse, where theirs was fine" (Seddon 1997: 25). And, writing of the Scottish Highlands, Stuart-Murray explains how in the nineteenth century the decline in the Gaelic language, combined with the universalising language of the English surveyors, resulted in a loss of the richness of naming, for example, where one particular loch has "an English adjective attached to it as well as a misapplied and misspelt Gaelic one" (Stuart-Murray 1995: 32).

Metaphorically, Byrnes quite explicitly dissects the surveyors' practices into *reading* and *writing* the landscape, explaining how, "Surveyors constructed cultural landscapes by invoking gazes that were both hegemonic and appropriative: the *read* the land in order to assess its present and future potential. The remaining

BOOK REVIEW

tasks were to *write* the country, to name the land, capturing its presence on the page” (p 76, italics my emphasis).

Another term used both literally and metaphorically in *Boundary Markers* is ‘space’, offering insightful parallels between the physical marking of the land, and the perceptual relationships between the surveyors and what they encountered. The notion of ‘constructing’ colonial space is a prevailing one in contemporary writing, reflecting poststructuralism’s multiple views of reality. As Byrnes writes “Through placenaming and mapping, land surveyors constructed their own forms of geographical reality” (p 94).

The surveyors were not only grappling with a physical engagement with the land, but also a cultural engagement with Maori in a range of ways. Byrnes extends the spatial metaphor to the “boundaries of cultural difference”; the “space between cultures” (p 120). She describes how “They [the surveyors] were challenged by natural boundaries (rivers, hills and ridges), but attempted to impose their own marks on the land. However, the boundaries of cultural difference between surveyors and Maori were less clear-cut: these were often confused and frequently blurred” (p 121).

Byrnes conveys an evocative sense of the surveyors’ abstracted notions of space settling onto the realities of New Zealand topography. The frisson between Cartesian orthogonality and uncooperative local landscapes is one of the defining elements of the New Zealand cultural landscape. As JH Lowe wrote in 1870, “The town of Westport has hardly existed, except on paper ... the Map of the Town shews [sic] streets and squares in abundance which are yet as such in a state of nature as when Captain Cook first arrived” (p 91).

While it is true that images can be ‘read’ for content, I found Byrnes’s commentaries on the images sometimes too presumptive. We are told, for example, that one image (figure 41) declares “We are triumphant”, and elsewhere the insistence of what the “the artist is saying” (pp 68 and 69) seems very imposed. Interpretation of imagery is an area of some debate, and I found the captions the least convincing part of the book. As Byrnes herself notes, with respect to maps, the whole process of reading is open to multiple interpretations, that “maps are the ideal postmodern texts, in that they contain a variety of narratives that can be read by different audiences in a variety of ways” (p 77).

Despite this criticism of a somewhat heavy handed reading of the imagery, the sequence of plans and drawings with their attendant captions adds another layer of richness to the book, acting as a subtext within the larger work. Another layer of subtext runs through the footnotes. It reminded me of one of the gems of literature on the colonial perspective on New Zealand landscape, Paul Shephard’s *English Reaction to the New Zealand Landscape Before 1850*. This monograph is a seemingly modest 15-page essay on early contact with the New Zealand landscape, but much of the gravity of the work comes in the form of its 33 pages of footnotes! Surprisingly, Byrnes does not refer to Shephard’s essay, though the two works are very complementary.

The synergies between different books often adds something else to the reading of a particular text. While reading *Boundary Markers* I was also engaged with two

other texts: Simon Winchester's *The Map that Changed the World* and Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Winchester's book added a breadth to the historical setting of my reading of *Boundary Markers*, with the hybrid biography and history set in the early nineteenth century and tracing William Smith's obsessive mapping of the geology of the United Kingdom. The power of mapping and abstraction of the physical landscape onto the page was a contemporaneous concern of both Smith and the surveyors in Byrnes's book, and reading the two in parallel amplified for me the powerful shifts that were taking place in terms of the conceptualisation of space and "reading" of the landscape. Solnit's book also magnified my appreciation of *Boundary Markers*. As a history of walking, at first glance the title might seem as unenthralling as a history of surveying. Yet both books demonstrate how taken for granted practices encode powerful cultural perspectives on the world, and how much they say about our relationship with the environment.

For contemporary Pakeha New Zealanders, contemplating the activities of our predecessors has often resulted in feelings of guilt and regret. Byrnes's approach is a refreshing perspective on the colonial project, through situating the New Zealand experience firmly within the prevailing paradigms of the time, and from the perspective of contemporary theory. Rather than a self-flagellating tempocentricism,¹ Byrnes offers us a considered and enlightening view, without in any way concealing the doings of the colonists and their agents: "British ideas of New Zealand were ... based largely on visions that were both appropriative and objectifying" (p 76). She quite clearly identifies the magnitude of what the surveyors, as the expressers of colonial power, did to the landscape: "While the land surveyors had helped create one cultural landscape, they had systematically destroyed another" (p 38).

Boundary Markers is an important book for New Zealand cultural landscape studies. It offers an accessible and locally relevant text on a powerful transformation of the landscape, and a critically informed social history. It also adds to the process of shaping a national identity, elucidating the processes and products of the acts of measuring and plotting that helped shape the country.

ENDNOTE

1 My neologism referring to the practice of judging the past from the contemporary mindset.

REFERENCES

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