

LANDPRINTS: reflections on place and landscape
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The enigmatic title, *Landprints*, immediately engages the potential reader. What is a landprint? In this series of richly rewarding essays, the concept is given focus and substance. It seems to have two complementary dimensions: how we, as humans, imprint upon the land; and equally, how the land imprints upon us. George Seddon has been an energetic and perceptive commentator on this dynamic relationship between humankind and the land throughout his diverse career, and in this collection of essays he displays the insight and breadth of scholarship that has come to characterise his work.

The essays span some 25 years, and are arranged thematically: talking about, perceiving, locating, making, analysing and sharing and caring for place and landscape—a ‘fugue for six voices’. Short commentaries link and place the essays in context so that, despite the diversity of sources, the collection reads as a whole. Indeed, it is notable that the age of any individual piece seems largely irrelevant: the observations remain fresh and meaningful as do the underlying issues. The theme to which Seddon continually returns is how to become Australian in both perception and lifestyle. Or, to put it more generally, how can an overwhelmingly migrant culture truly adapt to living in the land we call Australia?

The quest for roots and ecological adaption is not unique to either Australia or George Seddon, but what makes these essays notable is the way Seddon draws out essential truths and questions from the particularities of the Australian experience. There is something profoundly tragic about the collision between the relatively youthful and exploitive cultures and ecologies of Europe with the older, more complex inter-relationships of Australia. Nor is the irony of our inverse nomenclature of the ‘old’ (European) world and the ‘new’ (Australian) lost on Seddon, but he retains a sense of optimism and commitment to the possibility of a better future. The idea of an exploitive Northern European ecology and culture is seldom used in a negative sense: rather, they reflect the post glacial conditions in which they evolved. The challenge is how to now adapt to a very different land.

Although disclaiming any particular expertise in ecology (his formal scientific training was in geology), Seddon is clearly an accomplished naturalist. He is particularly good at debunking examples of Ruskins ‘pathetic fallacy’ in our relationships with indigenous and exotic plants, pointing out that conditions are never ‘harsh’ for organisms that are well adapted. But it is in linking ecology with perception that Seddon excels: although he would probably eschew the label, his position appears to me to be an exemplar of critical realism. Whilst acknowledging that all knowledge and values about environment are inevitably framed by our human perspective; ‘As for antropocentrism, there is no

REPORTS

intelligible alternative' (p.192), Seddon remains firmly grounded: 'Granite is granite, wherever you find it' (p.xvi). In such confident hands, the combination of perception and ecology provides a powerful platform from which to tackle the big issues of our time.

The essays on gardening are fertile ground in which to get a sense of Seddon's personal resolution of the quest for rootedness. He reveals a thoroughly pragmatic inclination. But the key element which distinguishes his form of pragmatism from purely instrumental activity is his sheer curiosity, and his delight in the particularity of plants and their place. The desire and ability to embrace both the general and the particular are also strongly evident in Seddon's patent delight in the structure and richness of language. He uses this most effectively to both analyse and reformulate issues and arguments. One of the essays ('Words and Weeds') was drawn from this journal, based upon a contribution to the 1995 'Languages of Landscape Architecture' conference, of which George Seddon was a principal supporter. Indeed, attention to the power of language in framing our relations with land is one of the strongest features of the whole book.

The essays on 'Sense of Place' are probably some of Seddon's most widely read and well recognised works. His celebration of Perth, and more recently the Snowy River, are inspirational, even to one who has visited and experienced neither. I suspect it is his treatment of sense of place that will attract most critical academic comment. Seddon pays little homage to the materialist critique that has come to dominate the study of place in the social sciences. Although attentive to individual experience, Seddon largely ignores the links between power, class and place. Whilst his celebration of the Australian experience is more inclusive than some might acknowledge (for example, the essay on the Australian backyard), it is nonetheless a selective perspective. Seddon would not claim otherwise, but the popularity of his writing on place suggests that it strikes a chord with a wide audience, and thus expresses some shared sense of Australia.

Read and reread this book. It will reward you. I shall use it as both a reference and teaching source. I will also read it for pleasure, which is perhaps the enduring contribution of the essays. They make engagement with fundamental and difficult questions both challenging and enjoyable. Writing on environment issues can easily become a depressing liturgy of human failures, but as Seddon notes, 'It is counterproductive to destroy the faith of the young in their own society' with extreme rhetoric (p.198). *Landprints* offers an alternative approach, telling stories that are celebrations of place and landscape but also carry powerful messages which cannot be ignored.