
words for country
landscape
& language
in
Australia
edited by
TIM BONYHADY & TOM GRIFFITHS

WORDS FOR COUNTRY

LANDSCAPE & LANGUAGE IN AUSTRALIA

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UNSW PRESS

A UNSW Press book

Published by
University of New South Wales Press Ltd
University of New South Wales
UNSW Sydney NSW 2052
AUSTRALIA
www.unswpress.com.au

First published 2002

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Words for country: landscape and language in Australia.

Includes index.
ISBN 0 86840 628 7.

1. Landscape — Australia. 2. English language — Australia — Usage. 3. Landscape in literature. 4. Australia — Description and travel. I. Bonyhady, Tim, 1957– .
II. Griffiths, Tom, 1957– .

306.440994

Cover design Di Quick
Printer Griffin Press
Maps Emily Brissenden Design

WORDS FOR COUNTRY

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LANDSCAPE AND LANGUAGE

TIM BONYHADY AND TOM GRIFFITHS

When one of the contributors to this book, Michael Cathcart, wanted to take a four-wheel drive to central Australia on 'fieldwork', his university was perplexed. How could someone who works with words, a practitioner of *the arts*, need a landrover, particularly one already in such demand by others studying frogs, soils and plants? 'What are you *collecting*?' he was challenged. 'Adjectives', Cathcart promptly replied. He got the rover.

Words for Country rises to the challenge of that question. It is a collection of new writing about landscape and language from the Ord River in Australia's far north-west to Antarctica in the south, the centre to the coast, the prehistoric to the present. It explores both the environmental and cultural, the geographical and linguistic, the official and the vernacular — and tries to discover how stories grow out of or take root in particular places and may then in turn transform them.

'Landscape' and 'language' may be seen as opposites. While 'landscape' often evokes the natural world, 'language' suggests the human. But landscape is also a word freighted with cultural meaning which suggests a view that is remote and painterly — a product of the world of art[1] — while language can be portrayed as regional if not local, native if not natural.

Clearly, landscape suggests a place *and* a view, and language, too, projects the world. By pairing them, we seek to draw out the environmental dimensions of both, and also to emphasise the sense in which both are vernacular productions, often working organically on each other. How do these two concepts wrestle with, and mould, one another?

Literature in it widest sense — from prize-winning novels and poetry to government reports and tourist brochures — is vital to this book. But so too is what is said rather than written. Many of the essays record the authors' discoveries not just of local talk but also of local knowledge and memory, often more illuminating than what can be found in print. Art equally has a place as Australian painters and printmakers increasingly impress their landscapes with language.

Words for Country also ranges across and beyond the arts. One contributor, Kirsty Douglas, combines geomorphology with literary analysis. Another, Peter Hay, is a poet who has both taught environmental politics and practised it in the office of a State Minister for the Environment. A third, George Seddon, is a 'professor of everything' — English and environmental studies, geology and history and philosophy of science.[2]

Politics is, however, at the core of this book. Conflicts over land ownership, control and use — whether between cotton growers and pastoralists, pastoralists and Aborigines, Aborigines and archaeologists — loom large. Our interest is not only in adjectives, but also verbs and nouns, especially in how they are used in naming, understanding and arguing.

THE SPEAKING LAND

Aboriginal Australia was a constellation of languages, a jigsaw of inscribed landscapes of meaning. The 250 or so languages which existed before European invasion were repositories of knowledge about country, owned by particular groups of people as surely as those groups owned particular tracts of country.[3] Some of these languages vigorously remain, others are being renewed or reinvented.

Yet the loss of Aboriginal languages since 1788 has been profound. For almost 200 years, white Australians not just discouraged and denigrated but often even prohibited their use. As a result, only about a third of the original 250 are still spoken and many of them are likely to disappear over the next generation or two — a process encouraged by the Northern Territory's recent removal of support for the teaching of Aboriginal languages in schools.[4]

The anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt dwelt on this loss in 1989 in their book, *The Speaking Land* — a remarkable collection of Aboriginal myths and stories recorded by the Berndts in the course of more than 40 years of fieldwork. 'The voice of the speaking land, speaking in its diverse linguistic forms, has been muted', they concluded. 'It can no longer, or only rarely, speak for itself through its own homemade media. Not only is its content radically different, so are its vocal expressions.'[5]

The story of Aboriginal languages is, however, not just one of

uninterrupted decline, as George Seddon and Heather Goodall discuss in this book. Since the early 1970s, a combination of resurgent indigenous politics and pride and federal government programs has led to greater maintenance of some languages and a measure of recovery of others, including a number sometimes thought 'extinct'. The limited 'pidgin' first used in the early days of the occupied Gadigal and Eora countries of the Sydney region has developed into a significant form of Australian English which allows Aborigines to give full expression to their cultural and social identity.[6]

'Country' is a key word of Aboriginal English. According to Jay Arthur, another contributor to this book, it is now used 'all over Aboriginal Australia to name the place where a person belongs'. 'Country', she explains, 'may be either *mother* or *grandfather*, which *grows them up* and is *grown up* by them. These kinship terms impose mutual responsibilities of caring and keeping upon land and people.'[7] The anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose encapsulates country as a nourishing terrain: 'country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life'.[8]

The imperative for Aboriginal people to speak for this country in the last few decades has been intense, particularly as a result of land and Native Title claims. As described by Michael Walsh, they 'must talk about their land, mostly to strangers, in a strange setting, in a strange language'. They also are under pressure to make public 'the ineffable and the unspoken'. Sometimes the problem is not that English lacks words for what they want to say, or even that what they tell of is secret. Rather, 'the words just have too much attached to them', they are enmeshed in — and inextricable from — a web of associations. People can be 'rendered inarticulate not through ignorance but through a surfeit of knowledge'.[9]

Aboriginal people also speak *to* land, and they listen. Deborah Rose's Aboriginal teacher, Jessie Wirrpa, walked in a country full of sentience, where 'animals, many plants, Dreamings, the ancestors, and other things like hills or stones take notice, as people say'. An Aboriginal land ethic requires that subjects, human and non-human, attend to each other: 'Jessie took notice', reports Rose, 'and I never knew her to hear silence.' 'Does the loss of language close up the country?' wonders Walsh.[10]

AUSTRAL ENGLISH

Even before the First Fleet sailed for Australia in 1787, British publishers recognised an audience for information about the new settlement. Although none of the officers were established authors, at least two arranged to publish accounts of the colony before they quit Portsmouth and a number of others succeeded in doing so from

Sydney.[11] Diarists and letter-writers abounded. Yet words, for the invaders, were still a challenge because of the dissonance between inherited speech and local experience. The explorer, Charles Sturt, cast himself as a surmounter of not just geographic but also linguistic obstacles. 'It is impossible for me to describe', he repeatedly claimed, then duly did so.[12]

One of the invaders' prime ways of finding words was to give old ones new meanings. Governor King produced the first glossary in 1805 — defining 'brush', 'scrub', 'forest', 'creek' and 'lagoon' — so that British officials would have a chance of understanding a description of the Blue Mountains by the naturalist George Caley.[13] But words often acquired multiple, conflicting meanings, at least partly because there were no colonial dictionaries to help standardise local usage. The confusion over 'bush' was typical. By some accounts it denoted regions which were 'open and passable'. According to others, it encompassed 'all kinds of wild vegetation'.[14]

Both colonists and visitors were alive to the interest and significance of these novel usages — whether descriptive of their new environment or its exploitation. Already in September 1851, just a few weeks after the discovery of gold at Ballarat, one journalist reported: 'Gold is revolutionising manners and language'. In 1859 the *Colonial Mining Journal* declared: 'A great want felt in this district is a good lexicographer'.[15] But it was not until 1898 that E.E. Morris, the professor of modern languages and literature at Melbourne University, met this need with his *Austral English: A Dictionary* which covered both new words and old ones with new meanings in Australia and New Zealand.[16]

It took a New Zealander, Sidney Baker, to extend this literature with *The Australian Language* in 1945. In between, as noted by that great connoisseur of words K.S. Inglis, 'the most notable contribution of Australian linguistic scholarship to our national life' was 'the composition of those dictation tests we employed to keep out carriers of unwanted cultures'. The use of foreign or indigenous languages in the street excited widespread disapproval. Australia, Inglis observes, 'became even more a one-language people than the English at home'.[17]

Post-war migration and the re-emergence of multilingualism in Australia led to greater acceptance, and celebration, of Australian English,[18] although even larrikin patriots like the zoologist Jock Marshall continued to be embarrassed by the Australian accent. W.S. Ramson, another New Zealander, was particularly significant. He published his *Australian English* in 1966, then his monumental *Australian National Dictionary* in 1988.[19] Since then a host of other historians of language led by Bruce Moore have followed with more focused studies including Moore's own dictionary of the language of the gold

rushes and Bernadette Hince's *The Antarctic Dictionary* (2000).[20]

Brigid Hains and George Seddon build on this tradition in this book. Hains follows Hince in examining Australia's southernmost language and landscape — discovering another frontier where explorers were 'rendered speechless' only to write at length. Seddon, long renowned for his writing both about Perth in the west and the Snowy River in the east, here bridges the Tasman. If language is any guide to a culture, his comparison of New Zealand and Australia suggests radically different destinies for nations with very similar settler origins.

THE ROAD TO ULURU

Before Paul Carter published *The Road to Botany Bay* in 1987, the history of place-naming seemed more or less devoid of interest, both in Australia and more generally. On the whole, it was just a minor concern of historians of language, a backwater of historical geography, a parochial obsession of local history. Carter gave it intellectual life and substance as he tackled the 'white myth, that names name places' and showed instead that place names name histories. He turned the study of nomenclature into a new arena of literary criticism, cultural studies and psychological, political and historical analysis.

Carter's focus was the period until 1850 when, as he put it, 'the Australian coastline was mapped ... the Australian interior was explored, its map-made emptiness written over, crisscrossed with explorer's tracks [and] gradually inhabited with a network of names'.[21] But while exploration might have slowed over the last 150 years, place-naming has not. Nor has it lost any of the significance for the cultural and political construction of the country that it enjoyed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In fact, place-naming in Australia has become the stuff of more overt, intense politics since the 1970s than ever before.

Much of this politics and conflict — explored in this book by Tim Bonyhady, Michael Cathcart and Howard and Frances Morphy — has involved the replacement of relatively recent European names with much older Aboriginal (or Aboriginal-European) ones. Should the mountain range in Western Victoria, which the explorer Thomas Mitchell dubbed the Grampians, be known instead as Gariwerd?[22] Should Ayers Rock revert to Uluru and the Olgas to Kata Tjuta? But the replacement of European names with relatively new Aboriginal ones has occasionally also been a major issue. The transformation of Fraser Cave on Tasmania's Franklin River into Kutikina Cave is a prime example.

These conflicts are all the more interesting because they have not just been a product of Aborigines asserting their prior, if not present, ownership of the land in question. In the case of both the Grampians

and Fraser Cave, Aboriginal names were first proposed by non-Aborigines. The place of Europeans in the landscape has also been only part of what sometimes has been at stake. As Paul Carter observed in 1991, when the dispute over the Grampians was at its height, a significant chunk of post-contact Aboriginal history stretching over a century and a half was also being threatened.[23] Carter argued that 'the value of these names now is that they bear witness to a history in-between', neither purely Aboriginal nor purely European.

The outcomes have often also been far from simple. The renaming of the Ayers Rock — Mount Olga National Park first as Uluru (Ayers Rock–Mount Olga) in 1977, then as Uluru–Kata Tjuta in 1992, is most significant. While these changes have been enshrined in Commonwealth law, the enduring controversy over the Hawke government's return of the park to its traditional Aboriginal owners means that the name of this area still depends on where you are. Outside the national park — on land controlled by the Northern Territory government — signs direct travellers to Ayers Rock. Inside the park — on land owned by the Anangu — road signs say Uluru.

A PLACE FOR STORIES

Writers in this book are concerned not only with naming but also with storytelling. Many of the phrases which they scrutinise have verbs. That is because landscape does not just shape language; the land itself is transformed by words, phrases and ways of telling. In this sense the book offers a humanistic environmental history, one that pays attention, as the American historian William Cronon has urged, not just to stories about nature, but stories about stories about nature.[24] It offers 'deep maps'.[25]

In America, the clearing and ploughing of the Great Plains for agriculture created an infamous 'Dust Bowl' in the 1930s, a named and capitalised crisis. A Native American (Pawnee) chief who had watched 'the Great Plow-Up', as it was called, had a warning for the settlers: 'Grass no good upside-down', he said. In an essay entitled 'A Place for Stories', Cronon argued that the progressive histories of the plains silenced these doubts, convincing people that nature would change to suit them. They substituted alternative folk wisdom of their own, encapsulated in influential sayings such as 'rain follows the plough' or 'if it blows, it grows'. They sound like rationalisations, but people believed and followed them; they were mini-histories that determined the pattern of settlement. Stories, it emerges, were a principal cause of these environmental disasters.

The stock of such stories for any place depends largely on where and how you look. In his essay on Queenstown in Tasmania, Peter Hay draws not only on an array of writing by others, including poetry, song

and a whodunit, but also his own verse and what he discovered while visiting Queenstown equipped with questionnaires and tape recorder, to prepare a government report. Nicholas Brown also releases a rich cacophony of voices in his study of the South Coast of New South Wales, showing how a rural region becomes enmeshed in official and urban languages.

Yet sometimes just one story — just one phrase — acquires exceptional prominence and power as a description of a place, if not determinant of its future. 'Rain follows the plough' is one example from the late nineteenth century. In this period there was intense debate in Australia over whether clearing, for pastoralism or agriculture, increased or reduced rainfall.[26] One side had a potent phrase; the other did not. The result of this linguistic imbalance, almost certainly, was more clearing as 'rain follows the plough' became a mantra that encouraged often unsustainable agriculture at enduring environmental cost.

The 'lunar landscape' — Queenstown's denuded hills — is another example. Since the local tourist association put this phrase into print in 1911, it has been this Tasmanian town's identifier. But over the last few years its future has been at issue not just because of natural regrowth but also because of proposed replanting. Hay's essay exposes the complacent expectation that the people of Queenstown would be only too happy with this environmental 'restoration'. In fact, most of them want to retain this familiar landscape, along with their old language, even if reluctantly they are prepared to see the hills gradually be revegetated as a result of letting 'nature take its course'.[27]

Tom Griffiths' and Heather Goodall's essays about western New South Wales show how such language can also change. In the late nineteenth century, popular enthusiasm for irrigation as a basis for agriculture was intense both within the 'Inside Country' and beyond it. The poet Henry Lawson was one of its keenest advocates. Now, as irrigation assumes proportions Lawson never imagined, its impact is arousing increasing concern. 'When the river runs backwards' is a phrase still gaining life — a powerful warning that natural laws are being flouted, putting the environment in jeopardy.

THE VERNACULAR LANDSCAPE

The study of landscape in the twentieth century has been closely identified with W.G. Hoskins in England and J.B. Jackson in the United States. Each of these scholars fulfilled a national stereotype: one was English, a keen walker who never learnt to drive a car, deeply rooted in ancestral ground and obsessed with the past; the other a mobile, motorcycling American, anti-aesthetic and eager for the future.[28]

Hoskins' best-known work was *The Making of the English*

Landscape (1955). He considered his investigation of the landscape as 'a new kind of history' which, as Donald Meinig put it, brought 'many researchers out of the archives and into the field'.[29] Hoskins' pioneering work was part of a more general revival of professional interest in local studies at a time when it did not have wide respect as a scholarly field. He made a radical claim for landscape as 'the richest historical record we possess'.[30]

Jackson advocated recognition and study of what he called 'the vernacular landscape', a landscape of the everyday, and one enlivened by mobility and change. The vernacular landscape is more elusive, more changeable, more fluid than the political landscape, and 'what survives is less a matter of ruins and half obliterated boundaries than of legends'.[31] The vernacular landscape is also neither ecological nor aesthetic. It is a landscape made through talk and action.

Part of Jackson's motivation for this definition was his dislike of what he considered the more extreme — and more vocal — forms of American environmentalism.[32] In order to undermine the American romance with 'wilderness' — a marked contrast to the British identification of landscape with the cultural and human — Jackson sought out the worked landscape, the spoken landscape, the organic, the commonplace.[33] He liked to find the ordinary, the mundane, even the ugly. And *vernacular* encompassed the motel and fast-food shop as much as the dwelling of a Pueblo Indian.[34]

This is of course, the rapidly expanding domain of 'heritage' — a phenomenon which, as David Lowenthal reminds us, is 'a quasi-religious cult' that is passionately partisan. Fifty years ago 'heritage dwelt mainly on heredity, probate law and taxation; it now features antiquities, roots, identity and belonging'.[35] In the history of European Australia, where administrative structures generally preceded an insider's knowledge of the land, there has been considerable attention to the political landscape, much less to the vernacular landscape. Nicholas Brown's chapter shows how the vernacular in Australia is often ubiquitous rather than local, how regional images of landscape are quickly caught up in a national language of types and icons.

But sometimes the local voices find powerful expression. Eric Rolls' history of the Pilliga forest in northern New South Wales, *A Million Wild Acres* (1981), is remarkable for the way it resists and subverts this centralising rhetoric and aesthetic, using an ecological sensibility and the careful accretion of organic detail to construct an 'unruly tract of local history', 'a deliberately feral book'.[36] Rolls' work is like an extended campfire yarn in which everyone has the dignity of a name, and in which animals and plants have equal status with humans in the making of history. 'I began to think that the whole forest seemed to be an animate thing, with voices', he reflected.[37] Les Murray compared its discursive and laconic tone to the Icelandic Sagas.[38] Through his