
Of Simon Schama’s seminal work *Landscape and Memory* (Vintage Books, 1996), Australian writer Nicholas Jose reportedly observed, ‘the Australian landscape challenges Simon’s basic thesis quite profoundly – the Australian landscape is not mapped by memory entirely or simply, and not our memory’.¹ It is this view that informs Jose’s exploration of the politics of place in his novel *The Custodians* (Macmillan, 1997) and resonates through Kirsty Douglas’s impressive book *Pictures of Time Beneath*. Deploying her training in both geology and history, Douglas examines the ways in which Australia’s ‘deep past’ or geological history has been recursively invested with cultural meanings since the nineteenth century to reveal the inherent entanglement of ‘human’ and ‘environmental’ histories.

Douglas examines three heritage landscapes of geological significance to explore the ways that these sites have been constructed according to the prevailing views of the ever-changing present. These sites are Adelaide’s Hallett Cove, Lake Callabonna in northeast South Australia and the Willandra Lakes Region in southwest New South Wales. These landscapes represent important episodes in the history of the earth sciences, respectively changing views of evolution, glaciation and climate change, and human antiquity. Beyond their value to the scientific community, these ‘canonical’ sites have assumed national and international significance in the context of twentieth and twenty-first century debates over issues such as national identity and land custodianship.

Through her analysis of the emergence of these sites as landscapes of geological and political significance, Douglas reveals the intricacies of heritage policy in Australia. Geological heritage, she observes, is a ‘many-headed beast’ (p.22) and this is shown through her exploration of the three sites. Each site is afforded its own section in which Douglas traces its geological history, its construction as a site of significance for the geosciences, its investment with cultural meanings, and finally its appropriation for the nation through heritage protection. This analysis overturns the fallacy of heritage politics, that such ‘heritage values [are] somehow immanent, already present, in the landscape’ (p.170). Instead she shows that it is through the human viewing and experiencing of these sites that they are transformed from rocks, fossils and human remains into landscapes of lasting significance, and that these cultural interpretations themselves are subject to change.

As a geologist, Douglas is careful to avoid notions of constructivism in her discussion of the geosciences. She prefers to situate her geological narratives in the context of changing scientific understandings of the deep past and weaves them with ‘other explanations of change in the landscape’ (p.14) of the sites in question. In doing so, Douglas successfully overcomes the disciplinary divide of science and the humanities. Through extensive research of nineteenth and twentieth century scientific literature, Douglas finds the historical narrative inherent within the earth sciences, although she notes that this is not without its problems. The result is an excellent history of the development and professionalisation of the historical

sciences in Australia, and the influence of the Australian continent’s geology on shaping international debates on geological change and human antiquity.

But her narrative is so much more than a history of science because it reveals through these sites of geological heritage the many and diverse ways that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have forged a ‘sense of place’ on this continent. Douglas’ colourful summation of Mungo Lady’s national significance captures this essence: ‘Courtesy of her narrative charisma, the timing of her discovery and her media prominence, she has been gathered into the bosom of the nation to represent all our beginnings’ (p.161). For settler societies like Australia, the land and people of both the past and present are the subject of an ongoing negotiation of issues of patrimony and identity, and together shape the nation for the future.

Douglas is at her best when she writes freely about the sites and distils the complexities of her narrative into eloquent and artistic passages, such as her description of the theory of continental drift as the ‘slow dance of former continents [which] becomes the bedrock of time to come’ (p.70). Elsewhere, she describes her characters, as ‘scientists of the deep past who draw shallow seas from deserts, glaciers from forests and mountains from lines in the ground’ (p.24). These flirtations with the literary are a soothing balm to the reader as Douglas expertly leads them through a dense but fascinating inquiry into the politics of Australia’s deep past.

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