

Thomas M Wilson, *Stepping Off: Rewilding and Belonging in the South-West*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2017; pp: 290; RRP \$29.99 Paperback

When Captain James Stirling and his crew sailed along the Swan River in 1827, they entered a verdant land of cypress trees and peppermints, vivid against a backdrop of dark blue hills. Little did they know they had arrived at the tail end of the highest period of rainfall since the 1660s, and that their hopes for a new life on the other side of the world would be pitted against the naturally dry and infertile conditions of the South-West. For this corner of Australia is an ecological rarity – one of only a few old, climatically buffered, infertile landscapes (OCBILs for short) in the world. OCBILs are unique, in that unlike young, often disturbed, fertile landscapes (YODFELs), the plants and animals in this area have adapted to thrive without the phosphorous, nitrogen, and potassium normally required for life. The original inhabitants of the South-West, the Noongar people, have been aware of this for thousands of years, and likewise adapted to live with soils that are three-to-four million years old. Australia’s white settlers in contrast, who came from European soils less than 45,000 years old, attempted to live without this awareness. But the South-West of Australia ‘is no pastoral idyll. This is a land that requires recognition of hard and ancient truths’ (p.50).

Wilson’s thesis in *Stepping Off: Rewilding and Belonging in the South-West* is that we’ve inherited a sort of collective amnesia about our place, and when we are disconnected from knowledge of place, we are disconnected from ourselves. This is not a treatise on ‘new age’ spirituality: Wilson’s argument is grounded in plant biology, ecology, agriculture, economics, and human history. We cannot afford to live *here* as if we were living just *anywhere*, he argues. The solution Wilson offers is ‘rewilding’, the restoration of native flora and fauna systems – but also a personal rewilding, a sense of knowing where you live, and allowing that to influence how you live. Thus, while Wilson focuses on the South-West, the challenge of rewilding is broader, universal.

Wilson begins with a broad geological and ecological history of the South-West (chapters 1 and 2), that, like all good natural history writing, will make the local reader or visitor want to go outside and see for themselves the plants and birds shaped by overlapping bioregions that subvert the rules of biodiversity. He moves on to explore the South-West through the eyes of the local Noongar people (chapter 3), musing on different cultural conceptions of hearth and home, and the manner of Noongar interaction with the land for tens of thousands of years; and then we see the South-West again, this time through the eyes of military men (chapter 4). Wilson’s own great-great-great

grandfather was one of the first settlers in Fremantle, and it is clear that Wilson understands his own place in the history of this region (chapter 5).

What does it mean to be affluent? Wilson asks, as he details how the newcomers to the South-West intensively farmed and logged the land to satisfy an abstract economy (chapter 6), and how the suburbs of Perth expanded from a town of wetlands and wildlife to a city built around (unsustainable) freeways and highways (chapter 7), its inhabitants unaware of anything different. The effects of this development are further explored in terms of the wheatbelt, forest, and animal life (chapters 8, 9, and 10).

The rest of the book is dedicated to the process of ecological and personal rewilding. From diagnosing the damaging impact set in motion by settlers and British immigrants, who were unreceptive to the 'reality of newness' (p. 226) of this country, Wilson turns to a story of hope: 'Hope', as evolutionary biologist and botanist Stephen Hopper puts it, that 'only ends when the last plant dies' (p. 218). We can learn from Noongar culture how to live sustainably in this corner of Australia, developing 'kalip'—a Noongar word that might be appropriately translated as 'bioregional consciousness' (p. 232) by paying attention to and learning about our immediate environment, and exploring the surrounding national parks and forests that are here for all of us. In doing this, we can make different or at least informed choices about the pets we keep, the food we eat, the gardens we grow, the leisure activities we enjoy.

The scope of this book is ambitious—in turn flying high over four billion years of Australia's South-West environmental history, then swooping low to examine a flower growing in a suburban Perth garden—but in knowing when to provide detail and when to summarise, *Stepping Off* leaves the reader more grounded, more curious, and more aware.

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