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Interfusing Aesthetics, Ecology and History: Disputing a Non-Convergent Evolution

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Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins, 1995. ISBN 0-00-215897-3 (HB) £30.00. xi + 632 pp.

Robin A. Butlin and Neil Roberts (eds) *Ecological Relations in Historical Times: Human Impact and Adaptation*. Oxford UK and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995. ISBN 0-631-19506-8 (HB) £60.00. xvi + 344 pp.

Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ISBN 0-521-48281-X (HB) £45.00. xiv + 416 pp.

If 'non-convergent evolution' signifies the emergence of a range of different adaptations in similar environments, then some purpose is served by extending its application to the proliferation of narrow academic specialisms. The powerful lure of modern environmentalism continues to challenge the contexts and substance of academic discourse, but the demand for outstanding exemplars is not easily met, despite the attractive premium. A reading of these three books confirms that, provided we are prepared to take the rough with the smooth, our progress through the difficult interregnum will continue to depend on the efforts of a small number of well-focused individuals and groups.

Landscape and Memory invokes an emphatic smoothness. From one perspective it echoes the recent reflective works of a host of cultural geographers, and art and architecture historians (e.g. Cosgrove 1993, Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988, Daniels 1993, Evernden 1992, Tuan 1993). From another, it transports the reader back several decades to an era of more assertive and more widely shared modes of discourse, and not only to that luminous statement on Nature-Culture relationships, Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Glacken 1967). Indeed, Schama seems to begin by re-valourising the geographers' old foundation idyll – the study of the earth as the home of 'man' – when he endorses the indivisibility of nature and human perceptions of nature. He writes of the interfusion of the landscapes that exist outside and within the human mind: 'Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock' (pp. 6–7). The book sets out to offer an 'alternative' way of looking and 'rediscovering' which politely eschews what its author considers to be the inhibitions and

righteous indignations of modern environmental history, and its ambit is much wider than academia proper. Schama's best constructions are those of the extravagantly talented story-teller. His ambition is to help us recover a belief in landscape tradition as the product of a shared culture 'built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions' (p. 14). So he charts the history of potent landscape metaphors through Western culture, using elemental headings for the book's primary parts ('Wood', 'Water', 'Rock'); and the humanities, rather than the sciences, provide his leading authorities.

The synthesis is impressive rather than magisterial. Significant regions and national territories of Europe are omitted, and reciprocities with Asia, Africa, Australia and Oceania probably deserved more attention. Spain is too seldom met on the European and New World trails. Rushing to Schama's light, we forget the long, interrogatory shadow of the Turk ... Thus, a huge and growing need, beautifully and necessarily incompletely addressed; and there is no denying the satisfaction. Faced with an embarrassment of material, Schama chooses sumptuously observed detail above gliding pretension, and the insertion of few autobiographical asides, some of them quite lengthy, strengthens the accent on bonding authenticity. His ruminations on *Wood* are enticingly prefaced by rediscoveries of a European Jewry in Poland, Lithuania and London (including a remembered jibe, 'Trees have roots ... Jews have legs', p. 29, and a jolting note on the supposed 'scenic anomaly' of 'out of place' Hebrews, p. 31), then by submersion in the wider European inheritance. The ruling objective is immediately captured in a narration of the extraordinary appeal of the mythic forest in conceptualisations of German identity, indicating some disturbing connections with displays of ecological conscience by the 'most barbaric regime in modern history' (p. 119). Schama explains how, from the mid-twentieth century, a consuming moral angst led to a shunning of the foundational past; and how one of the most ardent of the new political groups, the German Greens, became locked – or stranded – in the present and future. Then we are allowed a dissertation on the provocative artist Anselm Kiefer, whose work deliberately re-entered the mythic forest. Myths and memories intertwine: to ignore them is to be diminished, disempowered.

This kind of literary geography can be mapped too simply. German forests are clothed in militaristic metaphor; French forests are made to represent a passion for order; for the Poles there is the struggle for national freedom; the forests of the United States are sources of transcendental connection with a divine creator; and England's woods suggest liberty ('hearts of oak'). There is much more, naturally: all those crosses, for 'vegetable resurrection', in the paintings of Thomas Cole and others; their reverberations with the Old World's veneration of Holy Groves; the grafting of Celtic myths on to Christian symbolism; medieval forest equivalents of the Hebraic desert wilderness (for renewal, contemplation, re-communion); even the representation of Europe's Gothic cathedrals and churches as sylvan versions of heaven – holy carpentry, sacred naturalism. And so it continues into *Water* – associations, some of them

mystical, with the circulation of the blood; between totalitarian despotism and omnipotent hydraulic management (the unsinkable Mao, p. 261); the intricate grammar of hydro-mythology in the waterscapes and water architecture of the sixteenth century; evocations of the centrality of rivers to national and imperial destiny, and hence the successive transfers of mythic power from the Nile to the Tiber and ultimately to the Thames (but what of the Seas, the Oceans?). Then to *Rock*: if rivers be sources of life and earthly power, mountain fantasies find awe, horror and pleasure, may bring a love of magnitude – for measures, that is, of the stature of humanity, scarcely mere giantising. Thus, religion, again and again – St Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata on Monte Verna, his mountain similarly favoured and converted into inspirational theatre, exhibiting in its clefts the rocks that were rent during Christ's passion; Judaic, Christian and Muslim traditions of mountain epiphanies and transfigurations frequently bringing exaggerated anthropomorphic change, reversals of the mountain-human scale; in contrast, Chinese mountain representations subtly minimalising human presence, and the honoured dragons of the East *versus* the weird monsters of the West, fit only for slaying. When mountains became affirmations, throughout late-medieval Europe, of the Creator's power and ingenuity, the Swiss elected to graft on a kind of patriotic topography. Much later, the Mount Rushmore sculptures are *of necessity* located in the cleansing heights of the American West, hewn from its heroic geology, and safe from the seedy metropolises of the Europe-contaminated East (and the pinnacle of the colonisation of nature by culture – 'landscape to manscape', p. 396). But what small fry, in the larger context of pilgrim treks and tourist 'musts' (down to 'Calvaries of Convenience', pp. 436 – 42), and all those notions of Shangri-La.

The concluding section is an essay on the changing images of 'Arcadia'. No less persuasively than before, it moves from abstractions to landscape realisations, but with more extensions into the present: the nineteenth-century promotion of hiking 'trails' in Fontainebleau, the zoological garden, great city parks and Thoreau's *Walden* (the National park concept appears in the Introduction, too great a separation) – all of them as Arcadia, redesigned. Like the boatman-poet he describes with affection, Schama is consciously caring for and passing down myths to new generations. His tales are seductive, as required. Will the 'natural' scientist see too much of this arty musing as a sanction for interposition, a dangerous side-swipe at *hands-on* modes of scientific discovery? Perhaps; and if science is not exactly divorced from myth-making, it would have been very satisfying to have met more of its purportedly countervailing thrusts down the centuries. Let its champions answer. Will humanities specialists and social scientists protest the dominance of connoisseurship in Schama's selection? If they do, they may insert a note or two on partialities. But he has pioneered a credible account which is generally right for our times – and in its readability unusually 'accessible', also strategically right of course. Myths are meant to serve pragmatic functions in society, and this richly illustrated book is fired by a mature grasp of that hallowed principle.

The qualities of the essays edited by Butlin and Roberts also reside in timeliness: specifically, in the efforts made to blend 'human' and 'natural' archival materials at a variety of scales, in a joint engagement of a generous slice of time and space, and in the massive prospects declared in the covering title. Historical geographers and biogeographers have recognised the scope for cross-disciplinary and intra-disciplinary research on multiple-data sources for decades (especially since the 1960s, but originating in the 1930s – cf. Lambert et al. 1960, Godwin 1978), but the demands and rewards of other allegiances maintained the estrangement. *Ecological Relations in Historical Times* might be usefully read in conjunction with recent related titles (e.g. Beaudry 1993, Ricklefs and Schluter 1993). It is essentially the outcome of a short conference organised by the Biogeographical and Historical Geography Research Groups of the Institute of British Geographers, and that may account for a few of the weaker aspects of the production as well as the welcome co-operative initiative. Rather than dwell on complaints about proof-reading and the like, I add this single voice to the rising modern chorus: bring back the technical editors! On this occasion, price alone demands it.

Strictly on the research front, a practical editorial introduction discusses underlying technical problems, notably emphasising the fundamental disparity between the degrees of freedom allowed to Carbon 14 data and the like, and the pinpointing of single years and days by historical geographers. Understandable enthusiasms for the correctness of technique notoriously confuse ends and means, and tend to erect formidable defences around the cognoscenti, but in this volume a steady focus on environmental change, the tracking of fauna and flora migrations, and the transformation of cultural landscapes, lends purpose and cohesion.

The first set of essays includes an historical case for combined human and natural agencies in the formation of distinctive, conservationally-prominent vegetation types in the Outer Hebrides; palynological and lake-sediment analyses of changing land-use in old 'crofting' areas in the Scottish Highlands; and speculations on the emergence of mysterious and restrictive 'biting Highland midge' populations. Similar mixtures of pure and applied treatments and documentary and physical evidence characterise each of the following two groupings. Individual essays include expository regional studies of land use and environmental change in Northumbria, Snowdonia and the Cambridge Fens spanning centuries; an enterprising if not wholly convincing identification of valued 'relict' woodland features in Yorkshire based upon surveys of the modern cover; connections to archaeology at Finnish and Icelandic locations; and a return to that surprising concentration on insect indicators in the other North Atlantic studies. In the latter, as in some of the other essays on Britain, the influence of classic statements is pervasive and instructive (e.g. Lindroth 1957). The same threads are picked up for North America and the Caribbean, but the scope seems even more challenging. There are speculations on the 'ecosystem shocks' after the Spanish and British invasions; apparently novel claims for the

clear pre-eminence of Mayan over post-Columbian interventions in difficult wetlands; and an intriguing commentary on the spectacular transformation of the plant communities of California's valley grasslands, once again acknowledging the classics (e.g. Baker and Stebbins 1965, Zohary 1973).

Non-specialists may balk at the apparently confined spatial range of some of the field inspections (very deceptive, and common enough in the respective sub-disciplines), but a slightly more important weakness stems from the partial concentration on change in the Northern Hemisphere during comparatively ancient eras. Most of the essays (12) examine Britain and the North Atlantic Region (4 to the latter), and the allocation of only three in all to North America and the Caribbean is a trifle disappointing. Admittedly, very early periods offer the safest meeting place for palaeoecologists, archaeologists, historical geographers and others, but the bias advantages the natural scientists and proscribes the reach of deep-seated changes in research procedure. In addition, it could be urged that authentic ecological insights require global data, that the Southern Hemisphere evidence does rather more than endorse northern viewpoints, and that the enormous opportunities for similar collaborative work in 'New World' countries of both hemispheres include invaluable options for commentaries on the impact of government policies for settlement expansion, resource appraisal and environmental management. Taken as a whole, however, the collection demonstrates the point that current preoccupations with *sustainability* are undeniably hollow without a knowledge of real and putative 'baseline' conditions and an appreciation of ecological trajectories. More consistent attention to social contexts might have probed the significance of contemporary environmental ideas, whether scientific or vernacular (or mythical, *pace* Schama), in the dialectical and confrontational relations linking society and nature. If this book has begun to prise open the doors, the natural scientists remain the bolder activists. Social scientists and humanities scholars should be more prepared to add a little weight to this team effort.

Hunters and Collectors relates quite closely to *Landscape and Memory* in its restoration of the historical imagination and, in a much more limited sense which it would be misleading to stress, in an implied if critical fondness for connoisseurship. Griffiths is mainly concerned with the preoccupations and achievements of Australian 'antiquarians' – the list encompasses natural historians, ethnologists, philologists and genealogists – during the colonial era and the early decades of federation. He gently chides his fellow academic historians for failing to appreciate that the activities of this neglected group represented distinct inclinations and trends which roughly paralleled the rise of the academic history, and continue to flourish in the comparatively independent fields of environmental conservation and heritage preservation. For all sorts of pragmatic and idealistic reasons, modern academia can ill afford to ignore these beginnings. History from the lower decks? By no means: most of the participants were well educated hobbyists, and 'middle class' according to the simplest characterisations. Where Schama's version of 'big history' sweeps across space and time,

Griffiths is at pains to show how variously gifted and committed individuals and groups, predominantly immigrants or the children and grandchildren of immigrants, came to their accommodation with an antipodean base.

In its conformation to the Australian condition, antiquarianism was far more than a mere precursor of academic history, and while in wider contexts it may help to describe this hunting and collecting as another act of 'conquest' entrenching European possession (the 'history replacing myth' thesis), this sensitive analysis recommends that more layers of definition be added. As the keener colonials fastened on to fossils, then on to cultural artifacts – often well before the campus and museum 'experts' mustered forces – and when articulate 'natural historians' won a multitude of fans by waxing on about the intimate worlds of local landscapes and the changing character of the fauna and flora, they invested their new world with meaning, intensified their identification with it, augmented the pleasure and stimulus they derived from it. In short, they began the process of converting space into place. Sufficient cue for any number of subjects, that was surely a *raison d'être* for the great synthesising cousins, history and geography, as they sought footholds in the new society. But some of the high priests of academic history in Australia distanced their subjects from local anxieties and enthusiasms, neglected the roots. In the closing sections of this quietly provocative book, Griffiths finds resonances of the popular (occasionally populist) historical discourse of the colonial and early federation eras in today's national, regional and intensely local discussions on environmental, heritage and indigenous rights issues, and he asks for a much more vigorous involvement from academic historians. His own path has found rapprochement in a curiously emancipatory environmental history. Others are now itching to follow that lead.

The central argument is irrefutable. The contemporary and long-term worth of antiquarian enterprise is to be measured in its response to universal human needs as well as to the unusual challenge of nature in its Australia setting. Throughout the nineteenth century, conspiracies of silence were encouraged by strange borrowings from Social Darwinism confirming the inevitability of the disappearance of 'native' populations and the advance of 'superior' white civilisations. On this question especially, and in a slightly different sense in the equally disconcerting issue of the 'birth stain' of convictism, Griffiths (p. 108) finds 'an unconscious reflex, an unobserved accretion of silence'. Too many colonists drew a curtain over the past, veiling the emotions (*cf.* Smith 1975, 1980, 1985). Frontier violence and organised Aboriginal resistance gave way to the convenient myth of *terra nullius* and that was easily maintained in the popular histories, because the local peculiarities of inter-racial conflict seemed trivial when placed alongside more exciting international events in Africa, North America and New Zealand. The violence of dispossession had not entirely escaped the attention of the earliest chroniclers, but exposés of the worst excesses of white savagery were generally reviled as the slanderous charges of race traitors. Similarly, paranoia over the convict legacy distorted early scholar-

ship in New South Wales and Tasmania, which had received the majority of the 'transported' immigrants. Frequently, material evidence – written documents, hated buildings – was destroyed. Darwinian notions could be co-opted to soothe reflections on the 'passing' of the Aborigines, but the same muddled reasoning raised doubts about the 'calibre' of settler stock. Others have taken this idea of a general need to defuse the past much further. What was passionately desired, they say, was a massive and definitive proof of genetic quality: with the violent past expunged from their own door-steps, the future-orientated Australians plumped for history-making conflicts overseas. And so to the horrors of the South African campaigns, and on to Gallipoli and the Western Front.

This tale of progress towards a kind of exorcism is knitted into engrossing tales of the getting and blurring of memories, and the provision of indispensable cultural anchorage. History-making and place-making entwined in the antiquarians' arousal of past-consciousness, yet this is one case in which it is probably pointless to try to separate innovation from derivation. For instance, the immediate impact in Australia of George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* was originally examined during the infant phases of modern environmental history (Powell 1976), but Griffiths finds a good deal of additional evidence underlining the reach of other classics and connects it admirably with close historiographical inspections. Readers of this journal will be aware that Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selborne* emerged, coincidentally, during the first phase of European settlement in Australia. Griffiths adroitly traces its influence on some of the more refined local histories. Again, Thoreau's *Walden* clearly retained a resilient appeal for those urban intellectuals who felt the need to communicate a sense of national identity, and had been discomfited by the loss of the reassuring rhythms of rural life and the 'passing' of wilderness.

Yet the context and spirit remained ineluctably Australian. In that prodigiously remote settler society, cultural negotiation was an essential ingredient in the process of 'coming to terms', and rituals of place – European 'land rites' – promised an emotional and spiritual bonding with the new territory. Favouring democratic styles, tangible outcomes, the most successful antiquarians addressed important public anxieties in their natural history writing and busy 'memorialisation' (all those didactic cairns, all the statues and monuments), as well as by a number of urgent articulations of conservationism. In these regards, of course, the antiquarians were not alone: indeed, antiquarianism's warm embrace seldom excluded a number of other contributory preoccupations. Australia's progressives (or 'vitalists' – cf. Roe 1984) were much exercised in inculcating citizenship in the schools. They firmly believed it required evocations of place, coherent geographies of a distinctive past, and in that sense they were at one with the natural history writers, artists, balladists and novelists who chose to celebrate the maligned 'bush'. Therefore, while the particular role of the antiquarian impulse must be acknowledged, it should not be lightly disentangled from other concerns.

Griffiths's volume generally maintains intellectual coherence, but some of its chapters have a definite stand-alone quality to the extent that, for some readers, the continuity may be a trifle blurred by a demanding, episodic structure. This potential problem must be matched, however, against a palpable commitment to historical scholarship and environmentalism, and in any event the balanced and economic prose is usually a fine compensation. This, for instance, locates the antiquarians in their contemporary settings: 'The land itself could not be "collected", but it could be inscribed ritually and commemoratively. If artists and natural history writers began the sentimental and imaginative appropriation of the land, then urban progressives pursued it rationally through social and educational planning' (p. 150).

Hunters and Collectors is indisputably a critical revisionist statement on the undervalued links between environmental sensibilities, historical consciousness and academic discourse. Its tight focus on the state of Victoria and other southeastern situations will reinforce its credentials in Australia, but the discussion is so very fluently presented, particularly in the first two thirds of the book, that it is bound to win an international audience. Does it go too far? Reconstructions of the interwar travails of one of Australia's most colourful environmental crusaders, the pioneer geographer Griffith Taylor, have reported his despair over a marked absence of popular interest and support (e.g. Powell 1991, 1993). In 1911 and repeatedly over the next two decades, the pugnacious Taylor insisted that Australians had already reached the 'environmental limits' of settlement, and that their country's 'carrying capacity' would not exceed 19 million inhabitants at the end of the twentieth century. His optimistic opponents had conjured estimates of 50 million, even 480 million. In today's Australia, Taylor's forecast is honoured for its astonishing prescience; he is a celebrity once more. At the height of his campaign, he was howled down as a croaking pessimist, a traitor. Deeply disappointed, he resigned his university position and continued his academic career in North America. On these points Griffiths's survey begs new questions. He properly cautions history professionals (and others, by implication) on the folly of ignoring the powerful root of the word 'amateur'. But how much of the enterprise was fragile 'hobby' – likely to crumble, that is, under the scrutiny of pressing circumstance, the urgency of economic opportunity? How 'secure' was the identification with place; how widely diffused all the 'sensibility' and 'consciousness' uncovered in *Hunters and Collectors*? If Taylor was not exactly missing the pulse, did he administer the wrong medicine? Griffiths has re-opened a pivotal debate.

In their different ways, these books underline a growing recognition of the need for new 'environmental' directions in academic research and teaching, whether in the refurbishment of established disciplines or in the promotion of an array of novel engagements at disciplinary interfaces. Above all, they recommend a harnessing of blended techniques, methodologies and scholarly insights to produce improved forms of academic citizenship. That sounds a welcome note of adaptation.

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