

Catching the lyric of the country

A natural history of Australian nature writing by Mark Tredinnick

I

It was an evening in September 2002, and I stood at the counter of the bookshop in Glebe. It was the night of the launch of *Gum*, Ashley Hay's eucalypt memoir; and I was at the counter to buy myself a copy.

Right behind me in the queue, a woman asked her friend, 'So, is this nature writing?' This is not a question one expects anyone to ask in Australia, even in a bookshop, even at the launch of a book that almost fits the description.

When I turned, I saw it was Kate Llewellyn, about whose own 1987 book *The Waterlily* I had been asking myself the same question a day before. At the end of a book I'd been writing, an ecocritic's roadtrip through the terrain of some North American nature writers, I'd stopped to make a catalogue of Australian literature of place. I had expected to find very little. In fact, I found quite a lot. And I'd been wondering where and whether Kate Llewellyn's book might belong in the taxonomy of Australian nature writing I'd compiled. Now here she was in front of me.

We finished our bookbuying and got down to talking. Though not for long. The launch was about to get under way. Kate's thinking was much like my own about the state of the Australian literature of place—for that's what nature writing really is, a literature of place. Although, when you look, you can see that we've written a lot about Australian places, we haven't done particularly well at expressing their true nature (and ours, perhaps, within them). And the places themselves, about which we've written, seem to me to remain pretty silent in much of our writing about them.

Nature writing asks the writer to listen—to the world beyond the merely human. This literature, at its best, is a kind of landscape witness. It engages—lyrically, intellectually, reflectively, narratively—with the way things are, somewhere on earth. It speaks not only about but from the landscape itself. It is nature, writing. It is writing out of the heart of a place, as though the work itself were an expression of the place, a thing that place might say. A good piece of nature writing reads as a part of the ecology of the place it concerns, composed out of the same natural history that made the place.

Australian geographies have their characteristic musics, and rarely, it seems to me, have our prose writers caught those musics—or their colours and forms, for that matter—in the nature of their sentences. The syntax of the places is sclerophyll, is arid, is tough and tender (even where the places are wet); the syntax of the sentences is not. They still sound, these Australian sentences—in most of the books on the list of nature writing books that follows—as though they have their roots down in the parlours and country lanes of the land where the colonists came from, who brought the diction our prose writers inherit. Our sentences sound as though they were made elsewhere, rather than fashioned out of an engagement with local ground. They are not nourished by the same ground, they do not sound out in the same light, as the sclerophyll woodlands, the spinifex plains, the dry and wet rainforests, the brigalow scrub, the hanging swamps, the pastures, the closed forests of the places they describe. At least, this has been the case, in my reading, until quite recently.

We haven't quite come home—in our writing, in its musical ecology, I mean; and in our practices of belonging—to where we actually are. We haven't made our peace as fully as we ought with the way the Australian landscapes go; we haven't fashioned the kind of sentences they might utter—the kind that speak of our reconciliation with these tough, these arid and tender geographies. We haven't let the land take possession of our imaginations so that when we speak of it in prose, what we express is the land itself, and our own reconciliation with it. As Indigenous Australians have done for millennia, of course. As our poets, especially Judith Wright and Robert Gray, and many others now, have done. And as some essayists are now beginning to.

In the introduction to her wonderful study of Australian writing, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1965), Judith Wright says:

Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's and novelist's imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described, and as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures. (p xi)

Reconciliation with country, in Wright's understanding, underlies all literature, particularly poetry. How much more, then, should it underlie a literature that is concerned with many things, but chief among them, the nature and fate of the land itself, and of us within it; how best we might live there with each other and with the land?

No matter what else our writers wrote, they have continued to write, thought Judith Wright, two narratives—a story of our exile and a story of our almost overwhelming good fortune to be here and to be free in this strange place. And because this has been so, the landscape, which should be part of what we hear in every Australian sentence, often either 'takes up an immense amount of room' (because it is idealised, demonised or caricatured) or 'sometimes it is so firmly pushed away that its obvious absence haunts us as much as its presence could do.' For Wright, and for me too, it is this overwhelming, falsified presence or, on the other hand, this silence that strikes (if a silence can strike one) in much of our prose tradition until quite recently.

In 1965, Wright felt that at last 'we are becoming identified with this country; we are beginning to know ourselves no longer as exiles, but at home here in a proper sense of the term.' And we were, she thought, just beginning to write as though this were our place, the earth from which our stories and the voice of their telling would arise.

I don't think Wright's instinct about literature has been commonly shared in Australian literary practice or criticism, except among the poets—her understanding, I mean, that the best writing seems to come not just from someone in particular, but also from somewhere, from a place well understood and absorbed into the writer's life and language; that it comes from a place with which the work is, in fact, a kind of conversation, a call and response, a dance. Few of us have grasped—George Seddon is one; David Malouf is another—that the relationships between a people's literature and their landscapes might, even should, be reciprocal. It is one of the accepted truths that we fashion a notion of our environment through the words we bring to it and use upon it. But it is less well understood that the quality of light, the amplitude of the spaces in which we move and speak, the choreography of bird and plant life, the true pattern of the seasons and the rivers, the fire ecologies of the forests and grasslands—all this and more—will also fashion in us, in time, a literature adapted to the places in which those more than merely human things hold true.

One consequence of the loneliness of Wright's position is that, though plenty of writers have turned to the land for their subject-matter, few have gone there to listen to how it speaks; to find out what it would have them say of it, and how. Few have understood, as I think she did, that literature is always an act of listening to the larger order of things; that it is in fact a kind of joining with the poetry that makes the world we encounter, just here, cohere in just the way it does. Among the nature writers, many have described, but few have caught the lyric, of Australian places in that way. Most did not think they had to. As in our prose generally, so in our nature writing, the continent has remained unheard and silent, even though it has been much described. And since the 1950s, nature writing itself has sunk beneath literary awareness.

Forty years have passed since Wright wrote her book. And the land is starting, but still not convincingly, to sound in our prose. We have not got ourselves yet a tradition of nature writing. We are just getting going on that.

That night in September, Kate Llewellyn told me she had just finished a manuscript, a book that might be called nature writing, about a garden she has been making in the place she now lives, by the sea. Times are changing, if slowly. She told me she thought that nature writing was the next big thing. That it was about to catch on. I wondered then, I wonder still, if this is true. If it is, perhaps it's because, in a time of drought, in an era of rising salt and dying rivers, after two hundred years of colonisation, the land is finally seeping into the literary consciousness, is finally taking possession of its writers. I wonder if, specifically, more of us might be beginning to intuit what Judith Wright expressed—that a work of words must know the ground from which it rises.

Later, Llewellyn wrote to me about *The Waterlily*. 'You could say it aimed at the deepest, most simple and humble, ordinary pleasures of involvement with nature, that is, the back yard, the home garden, made by mum.' It was a rare and strange book in its time, and it still is. It is also a book with a small compass; and a focus upon domesticated nature. It was a turning from the city; it was a kind of pastoral. It is a lovely for all that. It helped keep alive a feeble tradition, feeding an unfulfilled readership, and it led Kate Llewellyn herself into a thorough reading of the English tradition of modern nature writing, and so to her new book.

Kate Llewellyn's garden journal drew a warm and loving response from readers, though it had felt 'audacious' and 'unusual' to her to 'look at things away from the public arena, nothing to do with modern life or posh matters, nothing political or socially valued.' Indeed, for a writer in the 1980s in Australia such a thing was odd. For it was nature writing, and so you will find *The Waterlily* in my taxonomy of Australian nature writing below.

But it is time the Australian literature of place stepped outside the garden—and into the wild. I mean in its orientation and in its diction rather than in its locale. There is nothing wrong with gardens or with pastoral landscapes—I, myself, love them both. Nor is there anything wrong with cityscapes and suburbs. But let us find a way to write of them as places first and cultural constructs second. It is time for a post-pastoral literature of place in which the place sounds out in all its wildness—regardless of whether that place lies in an urban or a rural area, in pastoral country or national park, in the field or in the forest, in the backyard or on the beach. It is time for a literature that is less concerned with how we humans imagine and change places than with how we are changed by them, how we fit into them. It is time for a literature that tries to imagine reality from nature's point of view. And it may help to step outside our backyards and gardens because they are—by virtue of gardening's pastoralising ethic, and its predominant European aesthetic—likely to keep us from entering into a deeper understanding of the older and wider reality of the geographies of this landmass, just as they are. But our gardens might be, as Llewellyn's was, a place to begin to listen.

It is time, too, to get over that old, disabling dichotomy: the city or the bush. Let's just write the places—the city and the bush—for the wild order that animates them; and understand them, first and last, as works of nature. For cities too are made of nature, and nature—the weather, the laws of gravity, the quality of light, the density of the rocks, the amount of fresh water—runs through them, transcends them, includes them.

Regardless of one's taste in places—Kate Llewellyn's, for instance, or mine—and no matter how hard you had looked that night in a very well-stocked bookshop, you would not have found much nature writing there, nor any nature writing section. Scattered in other categories—history, literature, natural science, environment, cultural studies, gardening, philosophy, travel and literary theory, for instance—you could have discovered some of the books I mention below. In fact, I had just been downstairs thumbing through Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*—which I found on a table of new nonfiction. Still no place exists for nature writing—in our bookshops or in the minds of readers (or many writers, for that matter). As a genre, it has no identity, no brand recognition.

So, here we were, two fans of nature writing at the launch of a book that may or may not have been nature writing, and not a nature writing section anywhere to be seen. As the land is silent in what we have a nature writing tradition, the tradition itself is anonymous in our literature.

IV

Here, then, is the nature writing we have done, such as it is. My list is far from exhaustive, and, inevitably, it is personal. It reflects my reading, and to some degree, my taste in reading. It includes only nonfiction. It is not that nature writing must only take place in essay form. Traditionally, though, it mostly has. As I suggest here and argue elsewhere (in the book *Writing the Wild*, I was just finishing when I bumped into Kate Llewellyn), it is in lyric nonfiction (along with lyric poetry) that a writer may accomplish best the deep immersion in place that nature writing calls for. In that book, and in the introduction to my anthology *A Place on Earth* (2003), I acknowledge and list the work of Australian poets and some novelists in writing as though geography really mattered. But here, I'll stick to nonfiction.

I have organised these books into categories that broadly conform with Thomas J Lyon's well-known taxonomy of North American nature writing (though I have altered Lyon's scheme in ways I explain in *Writing the Wild*).

NATURAL HISTORY ESSAYS

Gregg Borschmann's *The People's Forest* (1999); Alec Chisholm's *Mateship with Birds* (1922); Nicholas Drayson's *Wildlife* (1988); Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* (1994); Ashley Hay's *Gum* (2002); Robin Hill's *Bush Quest* (1968); Charles Laseron's *The Face of Australia* (1953); Donald Macdonald's *The Brooks of Morning* (1933); Stephen Martin's *The Whale's Journey* (2001); Ann Moyal's *Platypus* (2001); Graham Pizzey's *Journey of a Lifetime* (2000); Eric Rolls' *They All Ran Wild* (1969); George Seddon's *A Sense of Place* (1972) and his *Searching for the Snowy* (1994) (though this brilliant, sometimes detached and scholarly, sometimes personal, fiercely intelligent book of a river/river of a book is impossible to catch in a single category); Vince Serventy's *Wildlife of Australia* (1968); Paul Sinclair's *The Murray* (2001); Nicolette Stasko's *Oyster* (2000); James Woodford's *The Wollemi Pine* (2000) and *The Secret Life of Wombats* (2001); Mary White's *The Greening of Gondwana* (1986) and *After the Greening* (1994)

ESSAYS OF EXPERIENCE IN NATURE

Solitude and back-country living

E J Banfield's *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908); Charles Barrett's *Koonwarra* (1939); Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life* (1981); Barbara York Main's *Between Wodjil and Tor* (1967) (one of the very few consciously Thoreauvian works in the Australian literature); Elyne Mitchell's *Speak to the Earth* (1945); Douglas Stewart's fishing essays, *The Seven Rivers* (2001); Peter Timms' *Making Nature* (2001); Haydn Washington's *A Sense of Wonder* (2002).

Travel and adventure

C E W Bean's *On the Wool Track* (1910; 1925); Ross Brownscombe's *Blue Rivers* (1997); Charmian Cliff's essays from central Australia, especially 'The Centre' (1967); Frank Dalby Davison's *Blue Coast Caravan* (1935); Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980); H H Finlayson's *The Red Centre* (1935); Ernest Giles' *Australia Twice Traversed* (1889); Augustus Charles Gregory's *Journals of Australian Explorations* (1884); Barry Hill's *The Rock: Travelling to Uluru* (1994); Ernestine Hill's *The Territory* (1951); William J Lines' *A Long Walk in the Australian Bush* (1998); C T Madigan's *Central Australia* (1936); Thomas Mitchell's *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Australia* (1839); Francis Radcliffe's *Flying-Fox and Drifting Sand* (1938); T G H Strehlow's *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (1969)

Rural life and garden life

T R Garnett's *From the Country* (2001); Barney Robert's *Where's Morning Gone* (1987); Eric Rolls' *The River* (1974); Michael McCoy's *Michael McCoy's Garden* (2000)

ESSAYS OF PLACE

Memoirs and nonfiction novels of place

Alice Duncan-Kemp's *Our Sandhill Country* (1933) and *Where Strange Gods Call* (1968); Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959); Mrs Aeneas Gunn's *We of the Never Never* (1908); Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain* (1989); Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000); Marie Mahood's *Icing on the Damper* (1995); Kerry McGinnis's *Pieces of Blue* (1999); Roger McDonald's *Shearers' Motel* (1992); Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987); Patrice Newell's *The Olive Grove* (2000) and *The River* (2003); Bernard O'Reilly's *Green Mountains* (1940) and *Cullenbenbong* (1944); Carolyn Polizzotto's *Pomegranate Season* (1998); Eric Rolls' *Celebration of the Senses* (1984); Tim Winton's 'Strange Passion: A Landscape Memoir,' in *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes* (1999); Judith's Wright's *The Generations of Men* (1959) and *The Cry for the Dead* (1981)

Prose poems

Kate Llewellyn's *The Waterlily* (1987); Roger McDonald's *The Tree in Changing Light* (2001); Tim Winton's *Land's Edge* (1993); Barry Hill's *Broken Song* (2002) (which belongs in many categories, including the next one, but which I have put here to acknowledge its lyric power)

CULTURE & NATURE (Philosophical, theoretical, scientific and historical reflections on nature and culture)

W M Adams & Martin Mulligan's *Decolonizing Nature* (2003); Jay Arthur's *The Default Country* (2003); Richard Baker's *Land is Life* (1999); Bob Beale and Peter Fray's *The Vanishing Continent* (1990); Geoffrey Blainey's *A Land Half Won* (1980); Geoffrey Bolton's *Spoils and Spoilers* (1981); Tim Bonyhady's *The Colonial Earth* (2000); Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths' *Words for Country* (2001); John Cameron's *Changing Places* (2003); Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987) and *The Lie of the Land* (1996); Robyn Eckersley's *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (1992); Marjorie Barnard Eldershaw's *My Australia* (1939); Tom Griffiths' environmental histories *Hunters and Collectors* (1996) and *Forests of Ash* (2001) and his *Ecology and Empire* (1997), edited with Libby Robin; W K Hancock's *Discovering Monaro* (1972); Peter Hay's *Main Currents in Environmental Thought* (2002) and *Van Diemonian Essays* (2002); Barry Hill's *Broken Song* (2002); David Horton's *The Pure State of Nature* (2000); William J Lines' *Taming the Great South Land* (1991); Tim Low's *Feral Future* (2001); A J Marshall's *The Great Extermination* (1966); Stephen Martin's *A New Land* (1993); Freya Mathews' *The Ecological Self* (1991) and *For Love of Matter* (2004); Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfellas' Point* (2002); Martin Mulligan and Stuart Hill's *Ecological Pioneers* (2001); Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture* (2002); Peter Read's *Belonging* (2000); Eric Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres* (1981) and *From Forest to Sea* (1993); Deborah Bird Rose's *Nourishing Terrains* (1996); George Seddon's *Man and Landscape in Australia* (1976) and *Landprints* (1997); T G H Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* (1971); David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred* (1995); Martin Thomas's *The Artificial Horizon* (2003); Judith Wright's *Born of the Conquerors* (1991)

V

The largest category of books here by far is, as you see, the last—the many subtypes of books about mankind's relationship with nature. Most of these are not really literature, even in their own author's understanding of the term, though many of them are very important in the contribution they have made to ecological thought. They are books about ecology, which are, not themselves (most of them) literary. They are books about the encounter with wildness, books about naturalism, books about books about nature,

books of environmental history and philosophy, books of anthropology. But I want to come back to this category. What else have we got here?

There is quite a bit of straight natural history writing, the first category and the least lyric and personal in the taxonomy of nature writing. That says something, I think, about an Australian instinct for straight-talking, and a national aversion to lyrical and the personal discourse. If we didn't so often substitute cliché, fashionable irony and dogged recitals of fact for intimacy, I would say that national trait was a virtue. I think, on balance, it is what holds our essay-writing back.

Travel is a large category too. There are some good books here by some fine writers—Bean, Brownscombe, Clift, Dalby Davison, Barry Hill, Ernestine Hill, Lines and Radcliffe. All of these are place-literate and expressive, to at least some degree, of country. A colonising project, a nationalising incentive, a pastoral tone, characterises the books of Charles Bean, H H Finlayson, Ernestine Hill, C T Madigan, Francis Radcliffe (an Englishman) and the government explorers Giles, Gregory and Mitchell. But still you feel, you almost hear, the landscapes in their prose.

Much of the memoir, though land-based, is intensely concerned with family and personal matters, and it is hard to hear the particularities of landscapes speaking in many of these. But here, too, is some remarkable writing—some passionate, intelligent and subtle engagements with country, particularly in Alice Duncan-Kemp's memoirs of station life in the channel country in the first half of the twentieth century and in Judith Wright's prescient, incendiary, poetic and place-literate books of her own family's country. These, among our best books of place-oriented prose, are all works, I notice, by women.

But the bulk of the books dealing with nature in Australia are academic: histories; cultural studies of landscape perception; social studies of identity; anthropology; scientific ecology; social ecologies; ecofeminism; green politics and philosophy. All of it has great value; little of it is literature.. Many of the authors whose works I have included here (George Seddon and Geoffrey Bolton, for instance, Val Plumwood, Paul Carter and David Horton, even Peter Timms), though they sometimes run a personal riff, write dispassionately, as observers, analysts and scholars. Their language is constrained by the kind of orthodoxies that allow little place for the, what Neil Evernden called the 'green chaos,' to sing. They write about, they do not write much from inside, the encounter with the world.

A number of Australian academics in politics, philosophy, cultural studies, social ecology, theology and literature—Val Plumwood, Ariel Salleh, Kate Rigby, Robyn Eckersley, Freya Mathews, John Cameron, Stuart Hill, Martin Mulligan, David Tacey, Pete Hay—have, over the past fifteen years, led the world toward a new ecocentric paradigm in thought. They have written important books and papers, and they have participated through their work in the greening of the humanities—within the academy and to a small degree outside it. Great though the achievement of these Australian thinkers has been, it still surprises me that we have left most of the work of remembering earth, of remaking out relationships with the more than merely human world, to the academics, and consequently made ourselves a predominantly academic prose, so far, of nature.

Something—I think the lack of a tradition of personal and lyric essays and the fierce humanism and secularity of our intellectual tradition—has made those of us who have thought hard about landscape choose academic forms and diction, or, at best, the approach of the journalist or social historian, rather than the models of a more engaging, personal and lyric prose that American thinkers have practised for 150 years now.

The hold of our English inheritance is still very strong on Australian prose style. And it is not to England that we should be looking for models of the kind of writing we may need to bring our writing home. Ours—largely because this is also the case in the United Kingdom—is a literary culture dominated overwhelmingly by fiction, by the novel, a form made for mirroring society, but less apt for the larger realm of nature, beyond

the run of plot, dialogue and characterisation. Whereas the essay has flourished and remained both engaging and literary in North America, it has floundered, as a literary form, in the United Kingdom or Australia. Here, the essay has fallen largely into the hands of the academy, where it has become a critical, not a literary, let alone a personal, instrument. Nature writing can occur in many forms and genres, but it seems to go best in the essay. I have argued (in my introduction to *A Place on Earth*, pp 17 ff, and in the book I have just finished, *Writing the Wild*) that the essay, the lyric essay above all, has a particular fitness for landscape witness. For many reasons, we have not done much writing in that mode here. And one consequence is that we have not done much nature writing, not the kind, at least, in which the elements of personal engagement and lyric stylisation have their place.

If nature writing is, as Joseph Woods Krutch once said, a literature of experience with nature; and if it aims to deliver to its readers what John Burroughs called a 'spiritual auracular analogy' of the life of the place it witnesses, then it's going to be hard to pull it off if you don't write personally, if you don't engage lyrically with the land.

On the other hand, we may be inventing our own forms. Gregg Borschmann's eloquent oral history of the forests; the opening chapter of Jill Ker Conway's memoir and its droll, exact, unfussy evocation of the western plains of New South Wales; Ashley Hay's loving survey of the eucalypts; George Seddon's snowy river, which will not stay within its banks or behind its dam wall, and his caustic-poetic, fact-rich and humane essays about landscape and language; all of Eric Rolls' rambunctious, intemperate prose for river and field and forest; the passionate reflection of historians like Tom Griffiths, Mark McKenna, Peter Read and Libby Robin; the musical anthropological and literary explorations of the poet Barry Hill; the elegant and ecocentric art criticism of Tim Bonyhady; the brainy rambblings of Peter Timms; the anthropological conversations with land and belonging being led by Deborah Bird Rose and others—all these works escape my categories, really, and suggest that a new antipodean literature, steeped in these places and their grammars, is dawning.

That literature, if it does emerge, as it seems to be now, will include the voices of women and men, Indigenous and settler, writers of every culture. It will respond to—and express—the tough authenticity of this land and its many places. It will respond to and embrace the wisdom of the Indigenous land ethic. It will be a more musical, a more metrical, engagement with the dynamic spaces—the places—of this continent. It will be a literature that explores the meanings and ways of belonging here; that brings the vernacular of Australian places to a conversation about how to sustain more enduring relationships with the rest of the living world.

VI

Now, suddenly, the Australian geographies have started singing—'again,' I should say, because of course they have been singing for thousands of years in the literature of the continent's first peoples. They've begun (again) to find their singers. We are finding our way, on the evidence of recent publication, to a literature—as diverse as the places on this continent, and yet somehow Australian in the way all those geographies are, too—that listens to country. Nature writing—nature's writing—is upon us now, and it's starting to sound like here.

Adams and Mulligan's 2003 *Decolonizing Nature* (Sterling) is an important edited collection of academic reflections upon art, activism and nature. Nothing here in it is meant to be literature. But many its essays might stir such a literature into life out of the more poetic engagement with country Martin Mulligan, in particular, advocates.

Jay Arthur's *The Default Country* (UNSW Press, 2003), which she subtitled, intriguingly, 'A lexical cartography,' demonstrates at length what I have argued briefly in this essay and elsewhere—that we have described, mapped, pondered and attempted, now and then, to belong in Australian places in a language that belongs elsewhere, in words (and their attendant attitudes) formed in 'narrow, hilly and green' country.

England has remained the default country, argues Arthur, and it is through her cultural and linguistic habits that we have essayed our literary relationship with this 'wide brown land.' Because of this, the country has eluded us to a large extent. Is Australia really so 'featureless' and 'flat,' so 'silent' and 'barren' and 'limitless' as we have written her? Or is that our English inheritance speaking, an inheritance it may be time to transcend? Arthur's is an indispensable and challenging work for all of us who want to serve Australia in our prose. Its own diction is academic and sometimes difficult. But it may open our eyes and ears, and put new antipodean words in our mouths.

John Cameron's *Changing Place* (Longueville, 2004) gathers some of the best essays from the sense of place colloquia he has been running over the past six or seven years. There is some fine and readable scholarship here on the ways in which Indigenous people have and the sons and the daughters of the colonists largely have not come to belong in Australia through their cultural practices.

Ashley Hay's *Gum: The Story of Eucalypts and their Champions* (Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002) is a sustained narrative study of genus eucalyptus of the family myrtaceae, these trees that define us and our continent. This elegant work of sustained journalism approaches the trees themselves through the botanists, painters, poets, foresters and others who have helped the eucalypts take root in our consciousness. Lovely and readable though this work is, it perpetuates a characteristic Australian unease with the kind of personal engagement with one's subject that the essay demands. Let's call it, then, an early coloniser of the broken ground upon which a forest of nature writing may grow.

Pete Hay writes poetry and textbooks of environmental thought. He teaches environmental studies at the University of Tasmania and wrestles with how to give his attachment to country voice in prose. Out of that struggle—to be true to his subject but to retain the rigour of mind the academic learns to value—have come some fine essays, some of which he recently collected in *Vandemonian Essays* (Walleah, 2002). Hay will be, I think, our best nature writer in the years to come. He brings to the task a geographer's discipline, a poet's grace of expression, a Tasmanian's fierce sense of place, a far-flung and supple intelligence and an awareness of the best of the nature writing tradition. Watch this spot.

You may think Barry Hill's *Broken Song* (Random, 2002) a strange inclusion in this list. It is a study of the anthropological work and poetic life of T G H Strehlow of the Aranda country of central Australia. It's a biography. It's many things. But one of the things it is is a profoundly place-literate work, out of which, without question, the silent country sings, for it is written with its ear to the ground. It grounds Strehlow in his natural history. It understands how language rises from the land, it knows that a place is a poem 'awaiting notation.' This book then, among many other things, is a work of nature writing, and it arises, one notes, out of a deep engagement with aboriginal possession of country.

William J Lines—essayist, polemicist, radical greenie, outdoorsman, wild man—has spent the last decade pioneering a politically engaged, in your face, Australian strain of nature writing. His fierce environmental history *Taming the Great South Land* (Allen & Unwin, 1991) is a work of prose as elegant and savage as a fire in a dry sclerophyll forest. His latest work, *Open Air* (New Holland, 2001), is a collection of essays that continues the blaze in a series of spot fires. Lines is Edward Abbey on steroids, but without the sense of humour. You wish for some of Abbey's lightness. But, bad tempered and brutal though he can be, there is no doubting Lines' integrity and intelligence. He writes strong stuff, and all of it from the belly of antipodean nature. And he writes it well. I wonder sometimes if we are tough enough to take him. And I hope like hell we are. Nature writing—some of it—needs to set fire to intellectual terrain overgrown with sentiment and theory.

Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (Anchor, 2000) is nature writing as memoir. Mahood grew up on Mongrel Downs station in central Australia. Her book returns her to the heart of Australia, to her childhood country, the desert, the spinifex, the salt pans, the mild-faced shorthorns, the family ghosts, the pitiless vault of the sky, and the country's first people, whose whole cosmos this was and still is. I don't know whether the book's flatness of tone speaks the way this tough country speaks, whether what you hear is the author's

own true voice, or whether the book simply falls a bit short of its lyric aim. It is a struggle, sometimes, to read on. Mahood seems utterly at ease in this difficult terrain, but less at ease with the emotional terrain and on edge about the business of whose land this is anyway. But her book weaves together memory, other people's diaries and accounts, and her own first hand, present tense, encounter with this working, sacred, exacting country. It's worth sticking with it. Like the landscape it dances with, it takes a while for it to grab you, but when it does, you're gone for good.

Freya Mathews' new *For Love of Matter* (SUNY, 2004) describes itself as 'a contemporary panpsychism.' Its publisher calls it 'A bold and original work in ecocosmology and metaphysics.' 'Whatever the hell that is,' many readers may retort. Here's the problem one encounters with the academy's engagement with nature. This language, playful and inventive and challenging though it is, alienates more people, I suspect, than it persuades. But this is an important work of ecological philosophy. It digs and delves and it finds the root of our present ecological crisis in a dispirited contemporary metaphysics that has reduced the world beyond the merely human to so much wallpaper. Mathews does her best to reanimate, even to eroticise, what modern science and cultural theory has rendered inert—which is exactly what every nature writer attempts. This is prose both arcane and sexy. I hope the trees can understand it. I'm not sure I always do.

About Roger McDonald's *The Tree in Changing Light* (Knopf, 2001) I find myself quite torn. I love the idea of it—a cycle of prose poems, each of which reflects upon the life of trees in the lives of men and women, some of them poets, some of them madmen, some of them orchardists, one of them himself. If it amounts to a little less than the sum of its parts, that is forgivable, for it is an essay in listening to the real world, and its author experiments bravely with form, trying to find the right structure for his practice of attention—but leaving gaps in which something is lost. McDonald knows his trees and his tree people. He writes a dour, conversational kind of lyric, diffident and humble. This is Australian pastoral; it is wise and often lovely. (It is also a beautifully designed book, printed on a lovely creamy stock.) What's wrong, for me, may be a deeply rooted 'default country' music playing in his paragraphs, a thing he would be surprised, I'm sure, that I hear there. But there it is. And it's that note, unfortunately, the book's design amplifies, for there is nothing sclerophyll about the woodcut image that features on the cover and throughout. Forget my misgivings, though. They don't amount to much. This is the very kind of book that marks the maturing of nature writing in Australia. Each of us will hear and write the music a bit differently.

Mark McKenna's *Looking for Blackfellas' Point* (UNSW Press, 2003) won the NSW Premier's Award for nonfiction, and it deserved to. McKenna is comfortable in his skin, in his county and in his sentences. This is the way an historian writes essay, writes country, writes his way toward some understanding about the history and nature of a small piece of ground that comes to him. If the book's prose sounds more like the academy than the paddock or the creek, we can forgive McKenna. He is, after all, an academic, and writerly one at that. And he's listening; you can tell.

Patrice Newell writes as she talks and as she lives. She doesn't muck about. She writes to save the world she loves, knowing how unlikely she is to succeed, but she writes anyway. And she doesn't have time for lyricism. In *The River* (Penguin, 2003), she sees a river she loves reduced to a trickle by greed, ignorance and stupidity, and she speaks out. This is writing of plainspeaking kind. It is also prose shaped by drought, a river, a place and this woman. It is personal but never cloying. It is nature writing stripped bare and spoken in an Australian accent.

Reviewing Stasko's *Oyster* (HarperCollins, 2000), Eric Rolls wrote 'Nicolette Stasko has done for oysters what Mark Kurlansky did for cod.' Which, if it is not quite what Herman Melville did for whales, is, on the other hand, something less grandiose, more engaging, and altogether more real. *Oyster* is the kind of a (prose) book a poet writes about a mollusc—a shapely, accomplished and personal account of the natural, industrial and cultural histories of the Australian oyster. Stasko finds the oysters and the stories, she sees the angles, most of us miss. You'll never suck down an oyster again without tasting the social and natural ecologies that get it onto your plate.

Martin Thomas's *Artificial Horizon* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) has none of Stasko's fizz. It is a sombre cultural history of the Blue Mountains. It is cultural theory on vacation—but not quite relaxed. It is a book, a loving and sometimes personal book, all about a dissected sandstone plateau in which it's hard to sense a sandstone plateau at all. To be fair, it's a book about how we imagine the Blue Mountains, rather than how they actually go. It doesn't really set out to do what nature writing does. It is not an enactment of landscape witness. So despite appearances, this landscape-oriented work, is really not nature writing at all. It is a miscellany of mountains folklore and a model of how cultural studies can engage interestingly with landscape.

Peter Timms' *Making Nature* (Allen & Unwin, 2001) is in many ways our most accomplished piece of nature writing. This is an erudite but easy-going essay in belonging. It's a relaxed, antipodean *Walden*.

VII

Maybe it takes two hundred years to write in tune with a land you come to. Maybe it takes two hundred years, as Judith Wright suggested, for the land to learn to love a latecoming people. Maybe it takes two hundred years for your syntax to leave a small island you left long ago, and to let the place you've come to adapt your sentences to itself. It took that long in North America. It took that long for an American literary vernacular to come to light in Dickinson, Emerson, Whitman, Melville and Thoreau. Who can say how long it takes. But it seems the time has come in Australia. One of the ways you can tell is that we've got ourselves, of late, this sophisticated, diverse literature of landscape witness, these works of nature in which the lyrics of the country are starting to play. It would help if bookshops and publishers—and then readers, too—came to understand these many different books as some of the many species of the same genus: a literature of nature-oriented, ecologically imagined prose, some of it scholarly, some of it lyric, all of it belonging to here. But this recognition of nature writing as a literary genus will come, as long as the writers keep listening, forming their sentences out of a dance with where they find themselves.

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