
This book seeks to turn people from thinking of Australia as a ‘settled’ land to regarding it as one they are still ‘settling’. To that end it offers three overviews and ten case studies of the interaction of history, policy, and community action. It is not comprehensive – an impossible goal – but it is inclusive and diverse. Most of the authors are academics, but they come from different fields and rub shoulders with museum workers, scientists, community activists, and Eric Rolls, who is his own host of interests and expertise. They address everything from the evolution of law and legal concepts to memories of local communities. The introductory papers lay out some themes, and the case studies that follow are loosely organized in sections dealing with science, local communities, and public policy. The word ‘loosely’ must be emphasized. The authors stress that no one kind of knowledge or approach is the key, and they call for community involvement on all levels and the integration of various forms of knowledge. How we should live is too important a question to be left to the experts and their particular perspectives.

The first section has three general views. Dovers begins with settlement, which, he says, must be understood as a continuing process, seen as a matter of many voices and views, and both practised and studied at the local level and on a fine scale. Sweeping judgements and generalities are not going to get us down to the earth. Eric Rolls makes the case for respecting Aboriginal wisdom and the practical knowledge that comes from working the land. J. M. Powell speaks of our warring but useful instincts to conquer the land but also to live with it. The next section, on science, is an indictment of ignorance – or at least a call for caution. The problems it describes are, obviously, not unique to Australia, and readers might, for instance, compare Lindenmayer’s discussion of the ecology of mountain ash forests with Nancy Langston’s North American study, Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares. The section on communities and memories that follows takes a different tack. It illustrates Dovers’s vision of a new environmental history that will help us form a new relationship with the land. The case studies here argue that environmental history is central to environmental education, that community involvement requires taking local knowledge seriously, and that museums, using cultural history, have an important role
to play in bringing environmental history to a wider public. The final section, on legal and administrative aspects of land tenure and use, is in scholarly terms the most conventional. The importance of the topic in Anglo-Australian history and the long-term perspective of these papers, though, make it well worthwhile.

This collection is important because it speaks to fundamental assumptions that governed British settlement of Australia and still form the basis of public debate. The settlers who began arriving in 1788 sought – as a culture if not always as individuals – to understand the land through formal systems of ‘universal’ knowledge, and they treated it primarily as raw material to satisfy their immediate, economic, needs. Environmentalism has in the last generation mounted a serious and continuing challenge to these beliefs. It describes a crisis largely brought on by the conventional wisdom and suggests that only a new way of living can preserve the land and save the humans. Reactions to this program have varied from rejecting the environmental view to rejecting Western civilization. Most people seek some part of the great middle ground, and that is where this book is useful.

Few readers will find every paper useful, but anyone interested in how Australians understand or could understand their country will find much to think about. There is a wide range of disciplines, institutions, and perspectives, and the juxtaposition of museums and universities, of local understanding and national law, and of local communities and the nation makes for stimulating contrasts. Its descriptions of fusing formal knowledge with more popular understandings and indigenous wisdom suggest avenues toward a sustainable society and more satisfying lives. Whether these tactics will work no one can say. The argument, though, is worth considering, and there is ample material here for discussion.

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