

DIGRESSIONS FROM A DICTIONARY,  
OR  
A RAMBLE THROUGH THE PARKS\*

By Ronald Strahan

In assembling this title, I have followed a fine nineteenth-century convention that permitted a cautious author to express his second thoughts; as in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* and in Dean Farrar's *Eric or Little by Little, a Tale of Roslyn School*. You will, I fear, discover that the imprecision of my title is apt; for I shall digress and ramble and, at best, you may find that my remarks have tenuous lexicological links and that what I have to say about parks has some bearing upon our changing view of nature.

Philologists have good grounds for postulating the past existence of a primitive West Germanic word approximating to *parrack*, a pen or enclosure, or the surrounding fence. Through Old High German *pfarrih* or *pferrih* and Middle High German *pferrich* it became the modern German *Pferch*, a (sheep) fold. In Old Provençal we find *parran*, a walled garden and in Spanish, *parra*, originally the trellis or pergola and now the (grape) vine that grows upon it. Medieval Latin had *parricus*, later contracted to *parcus*, from which was derived the French *parc* with its modern meaning still with a strong connotation of sheepfold or paddock.

By the sixteenth century, the diminutive *parquet*, a small enclosure, had come to mean that part of a law court wherein the judges were segregated and by subsequent separate derivations the office of the public prosecutor; the *police judiciaire*; the bar of the court; and the board floor of the judicial enclosure, whence *parqueterie*, the making of such a floor, and English *parquetry*. One could follow *parquet* into the theatre and the stock exchange but that would lead us too far away from the fold.

The English word, *park*, derived from the French *parc*, is first recorded from the thirteenth century when it had the meaning of an enclosed tract of land held by royal grant or prescription for stag-hunting. (It differed from a *chase* which served the same purpose but was not enclosed by a fence or hedge.) Formalized stag-hunting was a

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Norman introduction, a royal or noble prerogative expressive of the contempt in which equestrian invaders tend to hold those who are tied to a location by the practice of agriculture. In this respect the Normans had much in common with the westward-moving Huns and the eastward-moving Mongols. Traditional marks of prestige die hard and hunting on horseback is still an expression of the status of the British aristocracy.

A park was not a wilderness — except in the sense that it was uncultivated — nor was it a forest. Only open woodland and grassland were suitable on the one hand for the deer and, on the other, for mounted huntsmen. Forest and wilderness have seldom been high in human esteem. The evolutionary transition from ape-like ancestors to the first men involved a movement from forest to open country. As hunter-gatherers we found subsistence in the natural products of savannah and plains. As pastoralists we utilised and encouraged the extension of grasslands. As farmers we cleared the land completely.

A professed love for wilderness is a recent phenomenon arising in Western Europe in relation to *Naturphilosophie* and the romantic movement at a time when almost all the non-urban land was under intensive cultivation or forest management. It was safe to express nostalgia for nature when it had all but disappeared. In nineteenth-century North America, still underpopulated and still with extensive virgin lands, it was, however, still possible to embrace the *naturphilosophischen* elements of romanticism with great sincerity: in this sense it seems to me that Thoreau was more to be respected than, say, Coleridge. Moreover, it may be noted that the national parks movement had its beginnings in the U.S.A. in the eighteen-seventies, well before any such action was contemplated in Europe; although, as we shall see, the British movement against the enclosure of commons was somewhat comparable.

In passing, one may compare the late-flowering nature-respect of Europe with the traditional nature-reverence of eastern Asia. While it seems that most cultures pass through a phase of nature-worship in which attempts are made to propitiate the environmental elements to promote agriculture, this tends to disappear or to lose its relevance with the growth of civilisation. In China, however, early nature-reverence was incorporated into a complex civilisation, being codified and recodified in the philosophies of Confucius and his successors. In Japan, it lies at the base of Shinto.

Yet, to an outsider such as myself, the end result is remarkably similar to the European romantic perversion. Neither the Chinese nor the Japanese really *like* nature. To the poet and artist, as to the landscape gardener, nature is a series of abstractions and symbols — of mountains, waterfalls, and trees in aesthetically appropriate relations. To them, as to the early European romantic (I include later generations of passionate explorers) nature in the raw is vulgar, to be shunned by gentlemen.

To the first Australian visitors, Australian nature appeared unspeakably uncouth. Sometimes, admittedly, their lack of enthusiasm was justifiable: one can hardly object to the double superlative which Dampier felt compelled to use in description of the portion of Western Australia where he unfortunately landed; for it *is* 'the most

miserablest' place. But even the more fertile and hospitable regions rarely evoked pleasurable passions in the heart of a European beholder.

The appropriate response of practical man was to subdue and transform the country: if one was of artistic inclination, the safest response was to ignore it. The interpretation of form by the eyes and brain is not inherent but learned in a cultural context. People who have been blind from birth due to opacity of their corneas and who, in adult life, suddenly have their eyes opened to the light by a corneal transplant, cannot *see*. The stimuli upon their retinas are the same as those upon ours but are without initial significance. Their brains have to be trained to the task of interpretation — a task so painfully laborious that some patients prefer not to undertake it: it is more comfortable to be blind. There is a comparable situation in art.

Professional European artists became resident in Australia in the early nineteenth century but failed to see the country. Most of it is harsh, the light is bright; the trees irregular in shape, and the grass greyish. These stimuli impinged upon the retinas of our early artists but they organised the trees into compact masses, transformed the coarse, grey grasses into green lawns, and arranged the landforms to conform with the golden mean. They confronted bushland and painted it as romantic parkland, lacking only truncated Roman pillars or the ruins of a mediaeval abbey to give their pictures unquestionable respectability. Buvelot, who is commonly regarded as the founder of the Australian school of painting, was an incurable romantic, suffering to the end of his life from European myopia. Even by the end of the nineteenth century, when Roberts, Conder, Streeton, and their pupils were able to depict the *elements* of the Australian landscape on canvas with reasonable accuracy, their compositions were strongly tinged with European romantic imagery.

And what has this to do with parks? I suggest that what the artist sees (or thinks he sees) and the values that he places upon what he depicts, condition our vision and our values. Did we ever see ghost gums prior to Namatjira or country pubs before Drysdale introduced them to us?

Laboriously I come to the point that if men of self-confessed sensitivity could not begin to see Australian nature until about seventy or eighty years ago, it is not surprising that we ordinary people neither saw it nor felt any interest in preserving it.

Let me digress again on values and attitudes. In Victorian and Edwardian times, industrial expansion was associated with great advances in science. It was reasonable to believe — and many reasonable people did believe — that we were close to absolute power over nature and approaching an understanding of all its principles. Power was good and if power involved spewing smoke, soot, and sulphuric acid over city and country-side, so be it. If it led to choking pea-soup fogs, these were a minor inconvenience: Londoners were perversely proud of their fogs and Turner made art of them.

Until recently, New Yorkers were proud of the sunless canyons created by their skyscrapers and there are many Sydneysiders today who — while recognising that their

city is growing uncontrollably like a cancer and, like a cancer, is strangulating its lines of supply and communication -- nevertheless take pride in the number of construction cranes on its skyline.

Mainland conservationists going to Tasmania to encourage opposition to the flooding of Lake Pedder were disappointed by the reaction of the average Tasmanian who is in favour of more and bigger hydro-electric schemes. Taking pride in Great Lake and other inundations, he builds his holiday shack on the shore overlooking the skeletons of drowned trees. We do not all love the same things as Dorothea Mackellar.

I certainly do not. When I was a zoo director, many people remarked to me that I must *love* animals and my reply was that I did not but that I tried to *respect* them. This, I believe, is the direction in which our view of nature is moving: towards a respect which recognises the right of a species to exist, simply because it is there -- not because somebody happens to like or to love it. This is yet another digression and I must return to the dictionary.

By the sixteenth century, *park* could mean a field or paddock, the word *paddock* having come from the English dialectal *parrock*, cognate with the hypothetical primitive German *parrack* with which we began. By the seventeenth century it had also come to mean an enclosed piece of land for public use. It thus approached the concept of a *common*.

In the middle ages, and earlier, the basis of land division in southern Britain was the vill, often corresponding with a parish and having agreed borders with neighbouring vills. (*Parish*, by the way, is not in the family of words derived from *parrack*: it comes, via Latin, from the Greek *para*, alongside, and *oikos*, dwelling place.) Within the vill, the arable land was divided into fields, each householder of the vill owning and working a strip, or strips, of land in each field. Non-arable land was allocated to sheep pasturage and what was left over -- essentially the wasteland -- was deemed to be common land for the use of all households.

An ecologist, Garrett Hardin, has recently popularised the concept of "the tragedy of the commons", based on the reasonable argument that a resource to which all have access is bound to be overutilised, since the gain to the man who, for example, puts an extra cow onto an already over-grazed common is more than the consequent loss (which is shared by all the users of the common). It is a valid concept but it happens not to be applicable to the commons of mediaeval England.

The common offered coarse grazing, rough timber, firewood, and sometimes turf and game -- renewable resources which were exploitable only within strong customary rules. The number of cattle that a householder might turn onto the common in summer might be no greater than he could feed from his own strips in winter, nor might he take more fuel than he could reasonably burn on a single hearth. I do not suggest that the rules were everywhere the same, that they were always respected, or that they were uniformly successful as conservation measures -- merely that they constituted the framework of a

system that seems to have worked for centuries in a period of rather slow growth of the rural population.

A communal approach to land use was not acceptable to the Norman conquerors. Each overlord sought direct control of all the lands in his fief and, while he could not always directly expropriate the villages, he saw no reason not to take over the commons. What I find surprising is that he invoked legal means rather than *force majeure*.

The Statute of Merton (1235) permitted 'the great men of England' to make their profit of their lands, wastes, woods, and pastures, provided that sufficient was left to satisfy the needs of their tenants. Needless to say, tenants and landlord seldom agreed on what was 'sufficient' but, in law if not in practice, the onus was on the expropriator to demonstrate that he had not taken too much. He had, as it were, to make an environmental impact statement; a gesture which could be as empty in the thirteenth century as in the twentieth.

The Second Statute of Westminster (1285) went further and permitted the lord of a manor to *enclose* common land for his own farming use, for sheep-grazing, or for hunting (in other words, to create a park).

Conscious that this cursory treatment of complex matters may enrage historians and lawyers and rather than get in any deeper, I pass over some five centuries during which millions of acres of common land were enclosed to become the personal property of a lord, although still subject, in many instances, to the vestigial foraging rights of neighbouring households. In the eighteenth century, the rate of enclosure skyrocketed: all that was required to effect an enclosure was the passage of a private member's bill in the House of Commons.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, strong opposition arose to continuance of the process. This is not to suggest that there had been no opposition over the previous six centuries but rather that this had been too widely and thinly spread: the handful of villagers affected by a particular act of enclosure could not effectively make their voices heard in the British parliament. The new, organised opposition came from the upper middle classes in the cities, people whose political interests were not very different from those of the enclosers but who were nevertheless upset by the loss of the last of England's open country. Although their interest may well have been an expression of the romantic movement, the argument put forward was utilitarian; that recreational access to green countryside was essential to the health of the urban working class.

The forces of opposition to enclosures coalesced into the Commons Preservation Society, led by gentlemen who constituted a powerful parliamentary lobby. The first fruit of their efforts was the 1866 Metropolitan Commons Act, which prohibited further enclosures within the Greater London area.

It was not immediately effective. Lords of manors within the area, strongly motivated to obtain land for suburban development, pressed on with their enclosures,

quoting the old Statutes of Merton and Westminster in justification. Under guidance from the Commons Preservation Society London citizens responded by resurrecting their rights of access to, and utilisation of, common land – rights which had not been exercised for centuries. In a classic test case, fourteen London lords, land-developers rather than farmers, became locked in a court battle with the Corporation of London over their right to enclose Epping Forest. The Corporation was victorious.

It is interesting to recall that, although the Commons Preservation Society claimed that common land should be preserved for public recreation and that this was for the greater public good, British courts could not accept this as a pertinent argument. The case of Epping Forest was decided essentially on the rights of householders adjacent to the commons versus those of the manorial lords and it was not until after the Second World War that a general public interest in land usage became recognised in British law. A recent decision of the High Court (*Stow versus Mineral Holdings*, 1977) suggests that we have some distance to go before the principle becomes established in Australia.

I do not wish to give the impression that enclosures were always against the public interest. Many of the largest areas of unutilised land in England were enclosed long ago by royalty as hunting parks and, thanks to a lack of pressure upon the royal family to subdivide these for cash, the New Forest and Dartmoor, for example, are still in existence. I see a parallel here with the Commonwealth's occupation of the North and South Heads of Sydney Harbour. We may not like some of the edifices and shacks that the army and navy have erected there but, compared with the urban jumble that is likely to have developed if the land had been under State control, these are insignificant blemishes. As a lazy occupant of the land, the Commonwealth has done the State some service.

In another historical comparison, one may note that the anti-enclosure movement of the eighteen-sixties, like the conservation movement of the nineteen-sixties, originated in the cities rather than among the residents of the threatened areas; that it was powered by the literate middle-class rather than by the masses who allegedly needed the open spaces; and that the land in question was of little value for agriculture.

By and large, only 'wastelands' have been available for preservation. The great expanse of Kruger National Park was put to its present use because the presence of tsetse flies rendered that part of Transvaal useless for cattle. Yellowstone, the world's first national park, was not desirable agricultural land nor – close to home – was the land now occupied by Royal, Kuringai, Blue Mountains, and Kosciusko National Parks. This is not to suggest that these parks could not *now* be utilised for grazing, forestry, mining, or suburban development; only that, at the time of proclamation, the areas had been worked over or passed over.

In nineteenth-century England and in Australia until the nineteen-sixties, public parklands were established primarily for public recreation. Wastelands are often nicely fitted for this function, it being easy to construct meandering roads or tracks through

them, to erect swings, see-saws, camping grounds and toilets, and to lay out lawns and pools in the most frequented areas. Where an area is unsuitable for agriculture because of precipitous terrain, one has the bonus of scenic beauty. It is not uncommon for the greenies among us – academic or illiterate – to deride this concept of a park, yet it is in accord with one meaning of the term in the seventeenth century: an enclosed piece of ground of considerable extent, within or adjoining a city or town, ornamentally laid out, and devoted to public recreation; and to the mid-nineteenth century American meaning of an extensive area of land of defined limits set apart as a national property to be kept in its natural state for the public benefit and enjoyment.

Over the past decade there has been a radical change in attitudes to parks. Among leaders of opinion, the cause of recreation has taken second place to conservation of nature. The change has been so rapid that it is hard to blame government for being confused and somewhat tardy in response. A minister points to the area of parkland added during his administration, reports with pride on the number of access roads and firebreaks constructed, and the information centres, toilet blocks, and barbecues erected: the conservationist replies, 'How terrible! Don't you realise that vistas destroy parks?'

There was a time, perhaps as little as a century ago, when untouched, unexplored areas of this planet were of sufficient size and diversity to support most of the species of plants and animals that had survived the last Ice Age. Some had a rather precarious hold. Wolves had virtually vanished from western Europe and the lions that prowled the plains of classical Greece and Persia were now restricted to north-western India. The bison of North America were fast disappearing; there was a bounty on the head of the Tasmanian 'tiger'; and the delicate pig-footed bandicoot, rare on the banks of the Murray River, was soon to be as dead as the dodo.

The human population was increasing and most people applauded. It exploded and the remaining wilderness came under the axe and the plough. Biologists had been complaining for a century but they were not heeded until the nineteen-sixties when, quite suddenly, a vocal middle-class urban minority realised that the only hope of retaining some fraction of the existing diversity of life lay in *enclosing* representative samples of wilderness and dedicating these, in perpetuity, as national parks or, ideally, as *international* parks.

To retain diversity, we refrain from further encroachment – or we limit our encroachment – upon natural areas. On face, this seems a reasonable and straight-forward proposition but it is not simply implemented. There are few remaining natural areas of such size that they can support more or less stable animal populations. Mere enclosure does not guarantee their survival and maintenance often depends upon management of the fauna – culling certain species and actively encouraging others – in order to maintain the original diversity. Paradoxically, ironically, we may often have to intervene in order to maintain a state of nature.

We have seen that the concept of a park, whether as a hunting-ground, a formal

garden, or a semi-wilderness, has always included its use by people. Yet, when a park is set up as a last refuge for native animals and plants, its use for public recreation must be strictly limited or even prohibited. Legislation for such restricted use is not popular.

Supporters of the current conservation movement have varied motives and varying understanding of the issues involved. On the extreme left (Luddite or 'green') wing are those who are opposed, on principle, to industrial society; towards the centre are those who feel that a certain amount of nature is a good thing; the right wing includes people like myself who see no alternative to industrial civilisation but are distressed by our inability to conduct research upon Tasmanian 'tigers' and pig-footed bandicoots because farmers, graziers and foresters have destroyed the ecosystems upon which these animals depended. It is we of the right wing who are most concerned to erect people-proof reserves for the last of our wildlife, and it goes without saying that we – the very serious students of nature – expect special entry passes.

Although their motives and interpretations differ profoundly, conservationists find themselves uniting in a movement towards a new ethic which would limit human rights and recognise, and grant, natural rights to natural entities. Can a river, a rain-forest, or a rat-kangaroo have legal rights in competition with those of a man? The question seems absurd but I doubt that it will to our children. They will have come to realise that man must co-exist with nature and that, while listening for whom the bell tolls, he needs must also mark the fall of every sparrow. We may indeed be on the way back to a reverence for nature – from which we evolved, upon which we depend, and to which our bodies eventually return.

We could, with excellent lexicological justification, proceed in another direction. In the seventeenth century, *park* came to mean a space occupied by artillery wagons, beasts, and stores in a military encampment. From this concept of an *artillery park* is derived the modern *car park*.

You pays your money and you takes your choice.