

SOUNDING OUT HISTORY: LANDSCAPE AND EXPLORATION IN RECENT AUSTRALIAN FICTION

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Where would you like me to begin? The start? The end? That's the problem with the past – the choice it offers. The advantages of hindsight. Things don't unfold before your eyes. You have to give it shape (3).

This passage, close to the beginning of Liam Davison's most recent work *The White Woman*, is part of a continuous questioning about landscape and the past which permeates his novels and underpins their structural considerations. Here the narrator challenges our preconceptions of history and fiction, addressing the fragmentary and unpredictable nature of a past which remains somewhere below the surface of the present. There is a challenge also to our understanding of landscape and its realisation as a process which is inseparable from notions of history, spirituality, journey and visual imagery.

The idea of "landscape" has moved beyond its limited definition as scenery and as part of the seventeenth-century Dutch tradition in painting. In the late 1960s, geographers actively emphasised the difference between their response to the land and that of the painter, poet or novelist. The difference, they suggested, lay in a variety of actions such as survey, sampling, or detailed inventory which would achieve a synthesis of multiple perspectives. Contemporary geographers would no longer find such a distinction so easy. Their theoretical responses to the idea of landscape, like those of late twentieth-century painters and writers, suggest that the notion of being at once an observer of and participator in landscape is a possibility.

Commenting on the limited notion of landscape in the early twentieth century, Bernard Smith refers to A.J. Daplyn's text on landscape painting published in 1902, and whose instructions to students are explicit:

Let the student realise once and for all that a landscape picture is a view from one place only, not half a dozen obtained by turning the head in different directions (224).

Late twentieth-century writers and artists are not merely turning their heads, they are moving physically through the land embracing its textures, sounds and colours, and celebrating its multitude of presents and continuing pasts.

Landscape is a web of inter-related events and experiences rather than a fixed object, and herein lies its problem. It is everywhere and nowhere, an elusive entity, that can be variously described as a journey, a series of fragments, and the relationship of the land with the people who inhabit it. In a recent interview, Liam Davison suggested that he sees not one landscape existing, but a whole series of different landscapes which are shaped as much by individual perception as they are

by communal understanding. Davison's fiction is part of a continuing search for meaning in the land through human associations with the environment.

Where much early Australian writing is highly descriptive, contemporary writers such as Davison use description sparingly, preferring to introduce environmental considerations as inseparable from the characters who have to deal with them. Australia's complicated array of spaces and vast, untouchable horizons are metaphysical frontiers, imaginative inventions challenging language and the provisional nature of place. Transformations of ill-defined and complex space and uncertainty about the past, motivate our writers to explore modes of perception and question the fixity of "official" records.

Disassembling time and compressing layers of history like an archaeological dig, Davison emphasises the exploratory nature of experience in the land and the interweaving of physical and spiritual concerns in realisation of landscape. His novel *Soundings* is an exploration of the essence of exploration. Using a series of inter-related journeys, Davison constructs a temporal collage of Westernport Bay. Swampland is experienced from moment to moment, detail by detail, and with glimpses of other moments and other details. Voices of previous lives, direct transcription of extracts from explorers' journals, act as sounding lines reaching through the surface of the present in an attempt to retrieve the past.

From the first brooding violence of the Westernport sealers in 1826, *Soundings* moves through a series of "possessions" of space, a series of re-inventions, a series of perspectives. A seal hunter's first encounter with the French expedition is a contradictory one. An unfamiliar language impinges on his understanding of familiar beaches, and his detached observation of the Frenchmen's scientific paraphernalia and activities sets almost the same historical tone as recorded in D'Urville's report at the time. The documentation and classification of trees, plants, birds and fish introduces a sense of historical authenticity. Davison's narrative invests the French expedition with a sense of urgency and precise organisation, and despite their insistence that they had "no territorial interests ... no interest in claiming the land," it is as if something has been taken or imposed. The seal hunter's landscape is no longer the same: "as if the mud, the water, the dark rocks and twisted scrub had somehow changed with the French names they'd taken on" (5).

The seal hunter is a narrative link between the French expedition and the continuing presence of the British, exemplified by William Hovell. Seen at first through an extract from his journal notes on a survey of the bay, Hovell emerges as a character in a reference book. His writing reveals an attempt at studied objectivity and again invests the narrative with the authority of an historical voice, a voice which is to reappear throughout the novel in a series of bizarre juxtapositions. Three segments, "Taking possession", "Settlement", and "Hydrography", where Davison makes use of historically specific terms, introduce European ritual and aesthetics. Hovell is seen raising the flag and the settlement is described as over-running the curve of the beach with "provisions stacked in rows ... and a regimented order which hadn't been part of the bay before, as if the

British were anxious to leave their impression on it" (59-60). It is an impression which remains invisibly etched into the land, recorded in faded drawings, stories, and a celebratory rendering of settlement as a cairn of stones – a monument to Hovell's discovery "that all of his calculations had been wrong" (127).

Davison introduces the explorer Strzelecki through a postcard from Poland. Used as an ironic bookmark, the card, which shows a picture of Cracow, marks references to Strzelecki's arrival in Westernport in 1840. There is powerful narrative interplay between the postcard image including its notes, and extracts from Strzelecki's journal describing his expedition's ascent of Mt Kosciusko. Thoughts on whether Australia had resembled Poland in Strzelecki's eyes, or whether his vision of the mountain had been so distorted by thoughts of love that he'd decided what he would find long before he reached the top, address the question of how we see. The way we see things and what we bring to what we see are part of the realisation of landscape. Davison's use of this device is underlined by his response to a question on the idea that what we see always depends on the instructions with which we look. He argues that while people carry their own personal landscape, imposing that on what they see and see only what they know or expect, there is also the possibility of it operating as a two-way process: that the land itself will shape the individual. Part of the process, he suggests, is the awareness that the land carries evidence of its own past.

A fictional photographer, Jack Cameron, is used by Davison as both observer and interrogator of the land. The novel is structured by his obsessive pursuit of a particular image and his idea of using an old photo-finish race camera to capture "time instead of space" (43). In one section, Davison concentrates on Cameron's attempts to photograph not just the swamp but its past as a landscape encountered by others:

On humid days his photographs caught the illusion: the land shimmering at its edges, the occasional glimpse of tea-tree surrounded by water. It was then that he thought he was closest to seeing what Hovell had seen, or the French explorers. ... He thought, if he'd taken another shot, changing the angle or getting in closer, or changing the speed of the film, he might have been able to see for an instant beneath the deceptive surface of things to what it was really like. But his own perception always prevailed. The land stayed the same. He saw what his eyes were conditioned to see and, no matter how hard he searched through the metres of film, there was nothing to show how others had seen it before him (106).

Davison's use of multiple voices, giving glimpses of details of past lives is as much a fictional re-invention as Cameron's photographic montages. The photographer's persistent search for some suggestion that the past is still there, lying below the surface, examines Davison's idea of the past being part of the present, that the past never completely disappears "almost as if the landscape is layered, that there is this awareness that the past is just below the surface of the present, and in some way we should be able to re-enter it through imagination."¹ Several references and images in *Soundings* are quite explicit on this point. Cameron's

drive through farmland reclaimed from the swamp is intersected by drains and bridges, and he sees, in juxtaposition with new homes, remains of shacks which he recalls are soldier-settler homes built just after the first world war. The narrator tells us that "everywhere [Cameron] looked, the land threw back a deception ... it was as if he was seeing the past – a phantom image of how the place had been – overlaid with the present" (108-109). Physical remains of past structures are an inscription of past lives re-entering the land in surprising and powerful ways, and there is a degree of comfort in that sense of continuity which is generated by such evidence.

Searching for evidence is the theme and structure of *The White Woman*. Like *Soundings*, this novel focuses on a series of journeys and the fragmented nature of history. Davison reworks traditional materials: inherited mythologies, historical records and oral fabrication. The storytelling takes place in 1896, fifty years after De Villiers' expedition to Gippsland to search for a European woman believed to be held captive in the bush. The narrator, who claims to have been with De Villiers, is addressing the son of an expedition member. Neither of these is named, and at times the telling seems to be directly to the reader, which has the effect of making the past into a continuous present. Uncertainty is generated by the apparent clarity of events which should be vague and incomplete.

Landscape in *The White Woman* is far more than descriptive backdrop or romantic overlay; it is substantially involved in articulating the inherited European myth of the woman or child lost in the bush. Interwoven with motifs of the Australian frontier and newspaper extracts of the time, the legend of the white woman is a tapestry of fabrications, tantalising hints of facts and a land which refuses to be ignored. Wilderness, with its biblical and mythic resonances, is central to the novel, and the expedition takes on the form of a Chaucerian pilgrimage as well as having the urgency and agency of a quest in which various environmental obstacles are fundamental. Space and movement within the narrative are carried entirely through the realisation of landscape: inaccessibility, lack of horizon, vagueness and illusion.

The white woman is an insubstantial being whose presence is inseparable from the land and a symbol of the civilising forces of a Christian community. Voicing colonial concerns, the narrator comments that he could not "bear to contemplate that endless expanse of scrub without her somewhere in it" (50). She filled a gap in the minds of a fearful populace looking into a strange, unexplored interior; she existed in their minds as a female presence in a wilderness. Natural wild and lonely areas, as distinct from deserted ones, have a latent and strong potential for regeneration, life and vitality – physical and spiritual. Davison harnesses this potential in his interweaving of physical and spiritual concerns, and a persistently feminine presence. The white woman never "appears" without reference to the environment and images of her are fleeting illusions frequently reduced to just her name whispered or chanted in aboriginal words.

Separation, isolation and distance are sources of apprehension, which Davison emphasises not only through the unreachable white woman, but through

his rendering of places dependent upon imaginative invention for their existence. Melbourne and newspaper stories become synonymous. The narrator says of the city:

Even in Melbourne with its grid of streets and churches half-finished on the corners, we felt it: the absolute isolation of the place. There was a feeling that we'd somehow cut ourselves adrift from everything that made us what we were (7).

It is as if a function of the expedition to Gippsland is to define a city to itself. Cavenagh, editor of the *Port Phillip Herald*, is an urban storyteller maintaining the fiction of an adventure story in a series of instalments which, despite government disinterest, emphasise the "common sense purpose" and high moral tone of the undertaking. As the narrator points out, even the name of the expedition leader was right: "Christian J. De Villiers. A Christian leading us into the wilderness! Cavenagh knew how to construct a story. They followed every step we made in Melbourne" (21).

Davison's concern for narrative structure and processes of history are abundantly clear in *The White Woman*. A character's remark that "newcomers have a great capacity for self-deception" (57) is as relevant now as it was at the time of first European contact with Australia. Carrying with it all the baggage of preconception, the observation addresses problems of visiting a past where historical remains, although still visible in our present, were once a significant part of an earlier contemporary landscape. Davison's work brings the past into a continuous present with an intensity that renders the white woman legend immediately relevant. She is a symbol that reminds us of the past, challenges us in the present and propels us into a future.

Both novels discussed in this paper are composed of fragments linked associatively rather than chronologically, their fugue-like structure dramatically creating and recreating history. Glimpses of lives and exploratory journeys move these novels beyond the confines of the text to become part of the wider experiences and imagination which constitute the idea of landscape.

Works Cited

- Davison, Liam. *Soundings*. St Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1993.
Davison, Liam. *The White Woman*. St Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Press, 1994.
Smith, Bernard. *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia 1770-1914*. Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975, Reprint 1990.

Endnotes

1. Liam Davison, interview by author, tape recording, Mount Eliza, Vic, 29 April 1994.