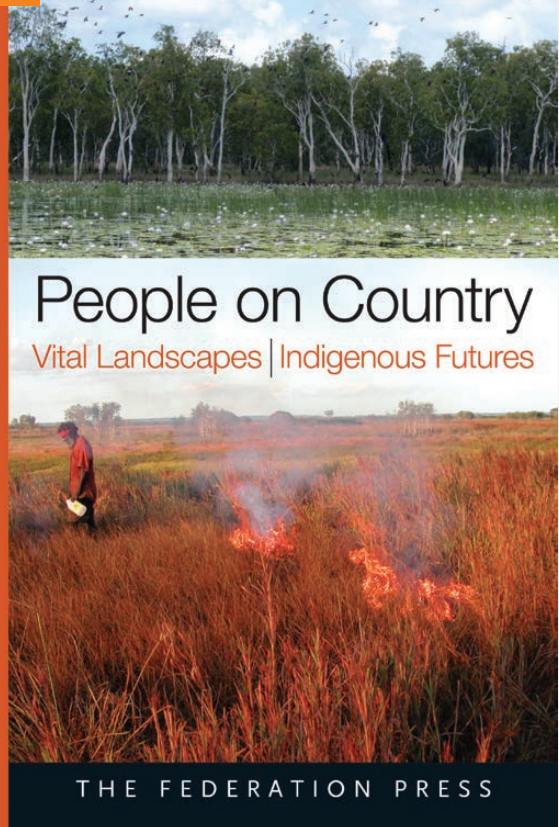


PEOPLE ON COUNTRY: VITAL LANDSCAPES, INDIGENOUS FUTURES

Edited by Jon Altman and Seán Kerins
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by *Tim Rowse*



Let's put this book in context.

The nation 'Australia' is a political arrangement contrived by settler-colonists who (nearly all of them) thrived in the temperate, agricultural lands of the east coast and south-eastern and south-western regions of the continent. Based on their experience of the imported political traditions and economic practices of those regions in the nineteenth century, they hoped, in the twentieth, to develop economic and political institutions that would encompass the entire continent: capitalist agriculture and manufacturing, liberal democratic government, based on the settlement of ethnically homogeneous migrants.

However, the federationists hardly knew what to do about the remote parts of Australia—north of the Tropic of Capricorn and the western deserts that vastly straddle that latitude—and their successors have found these regions difficult to include in the 'Australia' that the 'Founding Fathers' envisaged. In social composition, the Asians and the Aborigines were too numerous for the realisation of 'White Australia' in the North. The northern and central climates and landforms proved refractory to agriculture and unattractive to mass migration.

So much of the remote regions were unsuited to settler colonial ambition, that it was relatively easy for

humanitarians to persuade governments to set aside large portions as Aboriginal reserves and to engage the residents as little as possible. Where the lands of remote Australia were leased to pastoralists, Aboriginal people were useful as labour for many years, but commercially marginal pastoral colonisation—like reserves—was a relatively undemanding form of colonial authority. The mobilisation of Aboriginal labour in the 1940s war effort proved that Aboriginal people could be engaged in novel and transformative activities, but by the 1960s it had become clear that public and private investment in the north and centre was too little and too ephemeral to bring about deep changes in Aboriginal beliefs and behaviour.

To concede the land rights (including 'native title' rights) of remote Aboriginal people—starting in 1966 in South Australia and continuing far into the foreseeable future—has confirmed a massive 'Indigenous estate' (23 per cent of the continent and rising). However, a land *tenure* policy is not a land *use* policy. A consideration of New Zealand history makes this clear. In early twentieth century New Zealand, Maori intellectuals emphatically made this distinction between tenure and use: Pakeha (British-descended New Zealanders) had been persuaded (not without bitter struggle) to leave intact a substantial Maori estate, but what was the best way for modern Maori now to use that land? One persistent and influential

Maori demand was that the state support Maori to turn themselves into commercially effective agriculturalists, on their own land, without sacrificing what they considered to be the best of their traditions. The Maori demand was for Pakeha to recognise—through public policies—their need for adapted forms of land title, for respectfully offered technical knowledge, and for development finance. To New Zealand's credit and benefit, that Maori project was largely successful, within the constraints of Maori demography (their urbanisation since the 1940s made new agendas of debate about social justice).

In Australia's history, this question of the best uses of the Indigenous estate has only recently been posed: how to support, guide and enable a land-rich Indigenous people to use their land in modern ways—without having to sacrifice what they consider to be the best of their traditions? The question of how to govern the Aboriginal residents of remote Australia has bewildered Australian governments since the late nineteenth century. Until an Indigenous estate was conceded, public policy and the humanitarian imagination could defer answering the question of remote Aborigines' economic and social development: if they did not die out, they would somehow, sometime be absorbed—biologically and/or as *wage labourers*—as the continent was gradually occupied and used by the colonists. The formation of an Indigenous estate since 1966 has generated the question: how to imagine Aboriginal people not only as *wage labourers* but also as *land-owners*? That remote Aboriginal people are (or could be) both has generated alternative social, economic and ecological possibilities, and we are now debating them.

People on Country is a vitally important contribution to that debate, and it is no accident that two New Zealanders (who have long made their homes in Australia) are its editors. Although 'Maori' and 'New Zealand' are not in the book's index, we can see their edited collection as a gift from across the Tasman, as Australia at last comes to grips with the opportunity that Maori and Pakeha discussed avidly in the first four decades of the twentieth century. But note the difference that geography makes: for Maori the opportunities to be agriculturalists were both obvious and attractive. For the Aboriginal people of northern and central Australia, agriculture is but one of the possibilities (where soil, rainfall are good and markets are accessible), and not necessarily the most attractive. Indeed, with the world's valuation of the biosphere entering an epochal shift, burning the country has arguably trumped tilling and harvesting it.

The book is made up of three kinds of chapter. In Chapters 1 and 14, Jon Altman offers syntheses of public policy and history through which we can make sense of the recent Australian Government policies of supporting Aboriginal people to manage their country environmentally, known first as 'Caring for Country' and more recently as 'Working on Country'. In Chapters 2-6, six Australian National University ('ANU') researchers examine facets of these policies; pleasingly, several of these contributors are in the rising generation (under 40 years of age) of researchers. In Chapters 7-13 combinations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors offer more experiential descriptions of applying these programs to several regions.

The Indigenous estate, Altman explains, is of low commercial value, has low population densities (distributed through about 1200 small settlements), is under communal titles, and—in many regions—has high conservation value threatened by uncontrolled fire, feral animals and weeds. People living on the estate are marginal to established Australian economic activity (one reason for their poverty) but central to Australia's increasingly important mission to respect bio-diversity. They are materially supported by a combination of modified subsistence, trading (enjoying comparative advantage in the art market since the 1970s) and welfare state transfers. The Community Development Employment Projects ('CDEP') scheme has been one useful form of 'welfare': it enabled pooling of 'unemployment benefit' equivalents into a locally-managed and 'topped-up' fund from which people could be paid for—among other things—land-care activities (controlled burning, and the eradication of feral animals and exotic flora). Recognising the utility of such land-care to its nature conservation policies, the Australian Government from 1998 to 2012 declared 50 'Indigenous Protected Areas' ('IPAs'), comprising one quarter of Australia's 'National Reserve System'. In 2007, the Howard Government began to abolish the CDEP scheme (hoping to stimulate CDEP participants to waged and salaried jobs, of which there are too few in remote regions); and it initiated, in some regions, a Working on Country program, paying Aboriginal Rangers. One of the themes of the book is that the resulting 'transformative professionalisation'¹ of land-care work is both an opportunity (new technologies; collaborative interchange of knowledge with non-Indigenous scientists; a diversification of career paths for the next generation; the prestige of serving the nation and humanity; enjoyment of country) and a risk (continuing dependency on the state and the incremental subordination of Indigenous land use priorities to government objectives; continuing poverty, as labour supply exceeds program demand). Altman acknowledges that public policy now values the

Indigenous estate for both its commercial and conservation potential, but he fears that wherever the state recognises and supports, it also manages, in ways determined by an underlying ethos of commodification and maximisation of value. He sees the 80 sites of 'Working on Country' as zones of neo-colonial contestation.

Thus the book asks us to consider and to contrast the underlying worldviews of the state and of the owners of the Indigenous estate. In Kerins' review of the Northern Land Council's 'Caring for Country' program (a 'social movement') he says that:

caring for country is first and foremost about looking after ... powerful and sacred places; protecting their values, ceremonies, songs and stories, as well as associated processes of spiritual renewal, connecting with ancestors, food provision and maintaining language, law, knowledge systems and ... kin relations.²

The state's support for 'Caring for Country' was tiny, short-term and fragmented into discrete contracts for particular activities—administratively taxing for the Land Council to sustain. 'Working for Country' has offered more funding, but the obligation to harmonise with other government programs worries Kerins.

Ecologist Emilie Ens tells us what it has been like for the owners to learn how to render their country visible through systematic surveys using scientific field techniques. 'Biodiversity inventories' have renewed and increased their knowledge of their country, and their corrective interventions (such as fencing billabongs) have built confidence. Standardisation of intervention and observation—essential to credible field methods—has been more difficult, making Ens aware of 'differing perceptions and values of work'.³ Rangers are also hunters, Geoff Buchanan and Katherine May remind us, and thus 'customary harvest' is integral to 'conservation' work. State appraisal could easily understate the value (to health and as imputed 'income') of customary harvest: they give the example of recent food security and nutrition policies. Ranger groups, perhaps through a revived CDEP, should be resourced to harvest sustainably.

Bill Fogarty evokes land-care as a classroom that—unlike most in rural Northern Territory—attracts eager Aboriginal learners, of all ages. Land management practices arouse keenly felt demands for new skills, and Fogarty calls this effect 'learning through country programs'.⁴ 'At the genesis of the Caring for Country movement', he writes, 'Aboriginal people clearly articulated a desire for intergenerational transfer of Indigenous knowledge and for

the teaching of young people in western land management skills and scientific learning'.⁵ The movement will otherwise die with its current eminent men and women. He points to the fragmentation of public policy as a barrier to the state hearing and acting upon these desires, though now there are Learning on Country pilots in the Northern Territory. In her description of Aboriginal participation in a variety of environmental programs in New South Wales (both land and sea), Janet Hunt points to the fragile skills base but notes the benefit to Aboriginal management of the 'generally higher levels of Aboriginal education' and of English being the first language; however, the state competes with Aboriginal organisations for their labour. On the job learning by younger folk is inhibited by the structure of most contracts and by occupational health and safety ('OHS') and insurance requirements.

The seven studies marshalled as 'partner perspectives' reinforce and add to what precedes them: the desire for state agencies to be accountable and for contracts to be long-term (IPAs commit five years of funding); the need to complement land with sea management; environmental programs as contexts for teaching and learning; the mourned flexibility of CDEP. We get a reminder that non-Indigenous recreation is itself, around Nhulunbuy for example, a bio-hazard. State-supported looking after country opens an agenda of debate among Indigenous Australians about how they need to change. For example, Indigenous Australians have had to work out how to forge regional coalitions of clans that occupy the same bio-geographical zone and to develop stable answers to the question: 'how do we balance managing country with making an income from it?'⁶ These chapters also write of the need to organise women, as well as men, into land-caring groups, and to allow time for ceremonies. The authors want more and better housing at out-stations. Not surprising, they appreciate modern technologies: satellite imagery helps greatly in the longitudinal assessment of country's need for fire; Toyotas, helicopters and motorised boats get old people to places that they have long known only by their memories.

These people are practising an Australian patriotism that finds conventional expression in the eager surveillance of illegal fishing (sub-contracted to the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service ('AQIS')) and in Ngukurr resident Cherry Daniels' words 'We call ourselves Australian. We are all Australian. We live in Australia. So we come as one big group of Australian people. We teach each other how to look after our country Australia'. But there is something Indigenous about this patriotism too—a love of country that is uniquely informed: by

traditional knowledge, by experience—in the elapse of one lifetime—of rapid environmental change, and by an ontology of people-land connection. This is so not only in Arnhem Land, but also in Guyra, NSW, as Tanya Patterson shows. If you read nothing else in this book, have a look at Peter Cooke’s beautiful ‘A long walk home to the warddewardde’. Effectively a memoir of the late Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek (AO) (1926-2009) of the Western Arnhem Land Plateau, Cooke’s essay evokes—indeed embodies—how the movement has drawn strength not only from ‘the state’ (the Land Rights Act, the Northern Land Council, the CSIRO) and from ‘civil society’ (the World Wide Fund for Nature, Bush Heritage Australia) but also from long friendship between host (Lofty) and guest (Peter).

The book thus succeeds in humanising an experiment in public policy that does great credit to the Howard Government and its successors. On the one hand, governments produce an account of Aboriginal need as measured by the statistics of Closing the Gaps; this reiterates a belittling optic through which to understand Australian-Indigenous relationships: ‘they just see us as

all the same, poor and black’ (in the words of Jack Green and Jimmy Morrison).⁷ On the other hand, through the programs described in this book, these governments have also adapted the regimes of value through which we perceive ‘the Outback’ and its Indigenous owners, allowing us to appreciate the service that the traditional owners are rendering the country—if only we can recognise their custody—by watching, burning, killing, poisoning and harvesting as they know best.

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- 1 Jon Altman and Seán Kerins (eds), ‘People on country: vital landscapes, Indigenous futures’ (The Federation Press, 2012) 14.
- 2 Ibid 29.
- 3 Ibid 62.
- 4 Ibid 88.
- 5 Ibid 90.
- 6 Ibid 140.
- 7 Ibid 194.

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