

Latrobe Valley: Negative Charges

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I tried to read the landscape but what it said to me it did not say to others. Did it talk to me at all? Did I get those images only from here, from inside my head? Perhaps the landscape lied to me ... the country held me ignorant ... I was both actor and critical audience. (Wallace-Crabbe 13-14)

During the last year the industrial region of the Latrobe Valley in rural Gippsland has been the focus of unprecedented metropolitan media attention. Beginning with Age coverage of the rapid growth of gambling in the region, contextualised within the privatisation of the power industry and workforce-downsizing—'Life's a Gamble in a Town called Moe', followed by 'Valley of the Dole' in January—the media spotlight intensified when a child abduction and alleged murder took place in June. The 'Dole' article gave compelling statistics: 'The ABS has ranked Moe the 19th most disadvantaged locality in Victoria and Morwell the 46th. One in four families in Moe is dependent on pensions and benefits' (5).

In 'Tragedy Unfolds in a Town Long Neglected' disastrous human services losses were catalogued by the chairpersons of a social justice research organisation: the People Together Project; the Shire Council; the Medicare Office; the Gas and Fuel and SEC offices; Gippsland Water and the Water Board; the offices of the Department of Social Security, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Department of Housing and Planning; and the old Town Hall (for lack of maintenance). The recently-built hospital—funded in part by community generosity—is scheduled for closure.

The speaking positions, polarised by the age-old binaries of 'city' and 'country', were responsible for developing different 'truths' about the valley. During the reporting of the Leskie case, journalists' routine compositions of such stories were not well received by local media audiences. Metropolitan journalists were called to account for attacks on the identity of the region by residents through public meetings, radio talk-back, letters to the press and a special edition of the *Latrobe Valley Express*. One example, 'Journo Cops Moe's Wrath', criticised the journalist who had written about Moe's 'putrid odour' (unattributed, *The Express*, 7 July 1997, p. 6). Lost innocence, a natural way of life destroyed, a landscape despoiled—these were the dominant ideas which structured metropolitan media reports of the Latrobe Valley. 'We can't escape the question of how such bizarre and brutal things can happen in what should be a peaceful country town' (McCaughy and Bodna A17).

This paper collapses generic boundaries to respond to the question of narrating the 'truth' of the 'other'. Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* helps to distinguish the powerful ways in which generalising ideas about kinds of human settlement imbue the experiences and identities of the people who live in them with general meanings which are often different from 'the real history' which can be 'astonishingly varied' (9). Williams mentions the ideas of the 'natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue' and yet also 'backwardness, ignorance, limitation' which has gathered

on the 'country'; and the idea of 'an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light', yet also 'noise, worldliness and ambition' which has gathered on the 'city'.

Using literary examples he contrasts the country of the Jane Austen novels—a limited community of 'direct face-to-face relationships,' where a stare could be read as part of an intricate set of social understandings—with the later fictional communities of George Eliot, where descriptions of the denser and more complicated country towns could not so easily bear the burden of moral commentary. In Eliot's works 'country people' seemed as if they were shaped up not as 'active bearers of personal experience' (206) but speaking according to a set of externally formulated characteristics. Williams points to the disparity between Eliot's language and the speech of the people she sought to represent. He makes the general useful point: 'What is knowable is not only a function of objects—of what there is to be known; it is also a function of observers—of what is desired and needs to be known.' The communities to which we all belong are all 'imagined', as Benedict Anderson argues, the 'truths' about them subject to, and fixed through, selection, ceremonies of belonging and acts of amnesia.

The physical landscape of Latrobe Valley presents challenges to writers, apart from the fact that any account must begin somewhere as a narrative. 'Latrobe Shire' was artificially created as a local region which covers the coalfields, as a civic actor and an arm of government in 1994. Almost as its first act, the Shire put up the community signs of the hovering bird and took down each town's individual sign. Morwell lost its rose, Churchill its digitalised image signifying a university town. Under the palimpsest of the new maps, the individual towns emerging because of and around the brown coal deposits still struggle for identity and place. The landscape is dominated by what lies below the surface.

Coal is driving the momentum of progress and development further and further east as new fields are opened up in closer proximity to the eastern towns of the valley. The fear, particularly in Moe, caused by the drift is routinely discussed in the letters pages of the local paper, in community forums and Council minutes. The management of knowledge works at the level of the subjects chosen for description in the varied local historical and archival works on the Valley. These bear the burden of telling the story of aboriginal land, becoming pastoral land, becoming industrial land; and the landscapes which move from indigeneity to settlement to modernity to post-industrial.

In a local heritage journal, Moe in 1950 is represented in a photograph of migrant-worker tent settlement 'on the site of St Luke's Church'. Here the yet-to-be-built church stands as an absent signifier of progress, growth and a community bound by common rituals of worship. Pride in that imagined community, located in a point of heroic struggle with the land, involves erasures—yet it was this pride which contemporary news reports insulted.

One often-effaced aspect of the Latrobe Valley is the narrative of pre-settlement. The lives and identities of those preceding the white settlers have been largely excised from the official stories of Moe. Residual reminders occur when high school students are taught details of the Gippsland massacres or when there are speculations about the etymologies of local names, as in P.D. Gardner's cautious notations: 'Moe: Aboriginal. Possibly from the Gannai word meaning swamp'; or 'Morwell: After one of a number of places in England or an Aboriginal word. Most likely the latter from the Gannai language meaning 'inhabitants of the swamp'; or 'Yallourn: a composite name from Aboriginal words of unknown origins meaning brown and earth, given by Sir John Monash' (16-17).

Gardner's account of settler Gippsland begins in *Through Foreign Eyes* with Count Strzelecki's romantic vision of Gippsland as mankind in 'perfect harmony with the whole economy of nature'. His news of the fertile land opened up Gippsland rapidly and before long the Kurnai tribes were being treated with contempt 'by the lowest of the Europeans'.

The dominant ways of conceptualising community in this region are of white modernity. The land had to give up its hidden resources for the 'country,' populations had to be mobilised to serve the need for cheap energy. It is the proud boast of the industrial heritage museum that city lights went on from a power plant in Spencer Street, Melbourne on 7 March 1894, courtesy of the labour of workers in the Latrobe Valley.

These are the connections which Williams reminds us should not be forgotten.

The multicultural nature of the valley is celebrated in the same museum in photos of the tent towns on the site of the museum, housing 5,000 migrant workers. The multiculturalism is the result of cheap labour exigencies. Towns were built; an SEC town called Yallourn was removed; the landscapes of the region alter constantly—roads connect: roads end disconnected, their purpose served. The dormitory towns grow or decrease in population as the coalfields move east; rivers are re-routed because power is greedy for cooling systems; water tables rise; black holes go deeper, giving an instability to seemingly solid, immovable neighbourhoods which end in wire fences, precipitously, in Morwell.

The rises and hollows of the landscape alter as overburden from the open cuts artificially recreates an earlier pastoral scene. Sheep graze on land reclaimed from industry. On Open day at Mission Energy, the American conglomerate benefiting from privatisation, an environmentalist is my guide.

'We've created this. You wouldn't know any coal had been dug here.' He is looking at a scrubby twenty acres of pasture land. Behind him yawns Loy Yang's open cut, its sprinklers working, a dredger the size of a small ship worked by four men ceaselessly sending fuel up to the furnaces. The reservoirs and cooling ponds naturalise into 'country'. Wetlands come into being, further east this time, nearer the town apparently named after the 'river with little fishes', Traralgon. Even the pastoral can be re-constituted in the wake of industrial spoilage, allowing people to forget the costs—ex-power workers wait at the CES with mobile phones for casual work.

Landscape retrieval assists amnesia, but there are physical reminders. There is dirt, smog, smoke, and smell in Latrobe, 'Latrine Valley', 'Moccie capital', 'Valley of the Dole'. For newcomers the restructuring of the power industry can only signify the landscape of loss. So, the knowledge of changes for Powerworks, Powerhouse, Energy Bricks, Mission Energy, Gas Turbine, Briquette Works, Loy Yang B frames statements of movement in *The Express Classifieds*: 'clearing sale', 'closing down sale', 'moving sale', 'retreiver good with children, can't take interstate', 'home auction this day'.

A process of selection for visibility goes on around the word 'power'. Latrobe Valley stations illustratively act as shorthand for the problems of modernity: so 'Dirty Politics', *The Australian's* commentary on environmental problems, uses Loy Yang as illustration. An article on unemployment and privatisation, 'How Green was my Valley', is illustrated by plumes from Hazelwood. These photos work on a wide cultural level, acquiring and generating meaning for different readerships, yet they are full of contradictions. The city needs Latrobe to be productive yet the evidence of its productivity cannot be accepted as the bargain the city makes with the country. The country must still be the repository of innocence and the 'natural'.

The front page *Saturday Age* article, contextualising the missing child, can be partly understood within these powerful shifts in the economic, social, physical landscapes, the enigmatic and necessary negotiations of belonging; and the selections for amnesia. Heinrichs' piece, a 'colour' background to the Leskie story, began: 'There is something rotten in the town of Moe.' His is an echo of Marcellus's gnawing realisation that a mystery of universal import, and tragic dimensions, needs to be solved. 'The Valley of the Dole' begins with a similar example of heightened prose, a re-working of the opening lines of T.S. Eliot's tragic vision of modernity, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

The sky is unseasonably but fittingly stained in shades of charcoal, tar and carbon and sends a bitter wind through the near empty streets north of the railway line in Morwell. It rattles the doors of the abandoned stores in Princes Drive and Buckley Street and licks at the edges of the old For Lease posters. (Tippet 5)

The discourse of loss and failure read through 'city' eyes angered many residents, including 'Michele' from Moe. On ABC regional talkback, she spoke passionately of 'city/country' polarisations:

Listen, I have had a rep come into my business the other day and his wife had said to him, 'Oh, Heavens, you're not going to Moe—who would want to live there?' Now, I'm trying to run a business, I'm trying to keep people employed, which is an uphill battle in Moe. And when you've got people saying those sorts of things that have never been here, and let's face it 95% of Melbourne people don't even know what Moe, what the country communities are like ... And these women who came down: I said I made a sponge and I had to wait till I could cream it before I came, and you know, heavens, real cream! Yes, I went to the supermarket and I bought it just like she would if she was in Frankston or in Hawthorn. But they must think that I've gone out, milked 200 cows, separated the cream, gone off, thrown the kids in the back of the ute and off I've gone to this meeting. Now come off it. (ABC)

Here 'Michele' reacts to generalising ideas about 'country', while deploying equally negative ones, herself, for notions of city women. She is both 'actor and critical audience'. By 29 June, *Age* senior reporters were drawing attention to the class framing that Moe residents and others were giving those seen as responsible, invoking the Biblical reminder of looking 'through a glass darkly', to remind their readers of the egalitarian nature of Australia. They withdrew again onto the high moral ground from which the 'city' scrutinizes the country.

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