

## Conversations with the Land: Environmental Questions and Eleanor Dark

SUSAN CARSON, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

In 1937 Eleanor Dark told her London agent that she was considering writing a novel about her own country—but the problem was that she only had one character so far, ‘a blackfeller’, and ‘the idea of Australia, which is rather an alarmingly large idea’ (MS 4545). This novel, which she originally called ‘Black Man’s Burden’, became *The Timeless Land*, a national and international best-seller by 1942, a book Dark was happy to see given to Australian and American troops during World War II, but over which she expressed some amusement at its putative propaganda value.

For although *The Timeless Land* represented an apparent change in subject and style from Dark’s previous novels, the book was very much part of a continuum of national self-analysis, begun in earlier fiction, which often contested the very ideologies, such as patriotism, it was assumed to support. This paper discusses Dark’s evocation of the Australian environment, particularly her representation of the ‘land’, as a critical component of this agenda, and claims her work fulfilled an important, but undervalued, role in the development of a national conservation consciousness. The intellectual, eclectic and often provocative ideas she offered in the 1930s and 1940s are now part of contemporary dialogues of national identity and the cultural construction of landscape, reflecting discourses which still excite heated debate.

Within this framework she focussed on concepts of the ‘land’ and ‘landscape.’ Dark was, as she said in 1940, no ‘back-to-nature advocate’ (*The Timeless Land* 10), but she did oppose the ‘ignorance and greed’ which had committed the country’s inhabitants to the process she described as a ‘slow, resistant merging with their environment’ (‘Australia’ 10). Although influenced by family heritage,<sup>1</sup> her prime motivation was an intellectual appreciation of the land as a finite resource, and an interest in developing a political praxis for the harmonious co-operation of human and non-human existence, a view of society in which the co-operation of animate (plant or animal life) and inanimate (non-living) is essential.

At this point it is pertinent to clarify the terms ‘conservation’, ‘ecology’ and ‘environment’ in relation to this paper. ‘Conservation’, in general, is discussed as the enlightened use of natural resources, and differs from the ‘preservation’ of ‘wild’ terrains *from*, rather than *for*, development. Dark is now called a ‘conservationist’ by people who knew her during her writing career, and although she did not use the label herself, the term was in use—a 1934 supplement in the *Katoomba Daily* on the Blue Mountains National Park talks about this ‘Age of Conservation’ (Dunphy). Dark was familiar with both strains of thought: in her article on Caroline Chisholm she champions ‘enlightened progress,’ while in *Waterway* (1938) she depicts Winifred asking her capitalist husband, Arthur, for donations to save white gums discovered by hikers in the mountains (19)—an apparent reference to the Blue Gum Forest campaign.<sup>2</sup> She was associated, largely through Eric Dark, with the bushwalking and mountain climbing clubs of New South Wales which led to the establishment of a national parks organisation. Major conservation initiatives also were underway in the United States

at the time of Dark's 1937 tour, at the height of the Depression, when she stayed at Yosemite National Park.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the word 'ecology,' although not widely used until the 1960s, was prevalent in scientific communities at the beginning of the century and Dark was aware of scientific discourse, partly through the research of her medical practitioner husband, as well as the work of writers such as Aldous Huxley, with whom she said she shared a 'spiritual affinity'.

These extensive influences combined with Dark's Judeo-Christian intellectual heritage and her socialism to encourage her to search for a 'harmonious relationship' through her fiction, a quest which was in effect a personal 'pilgrimage'—the title of her second, and unpublished novel. The association of land usage and political structure became part of a cosmology which linked on one hand, personal relationships with the earth to a range of philosophical concepts about Nature and the 'land', and, on the other, to a political ideology, socialism, to which Dark had committed when quite young. In the 1940s she wrote that even at the age of 17 she had felt it was 'unarguable that the things of the earth belonged to everyone in common, and that it was preposterous that individuals should monopolise the natural resources of their country and make private fortunes out of them' ('Political Parties'). This opinion, she said, was a moral choice and did not involve political doctrine, but her ideas reflect a generally anthropocentric approach to the environment, aspects of which are reflected in what is now sometimes called ecosocialism. She continued by speaking of what she called the problem of the 'ideological cleavage' of modern politics: 'A balance must be kept—and is kept by Nature so long as we do not upset it—between different kinds of people.'

Within the framework of this 'environment', Dark constructed the category 'land' in two specific ways: first, in the physical sense of soil or earth, and the attendant need for conservation, and second, 'land' as a means of examining the category 'nation', usually through raising the possibility of various environmentally determined utopias. It is in this linking of political and environmental schemas within established literary conventions that Dark's work is interesting and singular. Peter Jackson and Jan Penrose's criteria of 'nation' as being a melding of a distinctive group of people, a distinctive territory or place, and a mystical bond between place and people (5) are pertinent theoretical concepts in this consideration. Dark's interest in linking 'land' and 'nation' was apparent in her early texts, but became a strategy with the conceptualisation of *The Timeless Land*. On 29 July 1940 she wrote to Williams Collins, London about her 'ambitious' plan for a trilogy, saying:

The first one deals with the white people as aliens in the country. The second, which I should call *My Native Soil*, (from a speech of W.C. Wentworth's: 'No man's heart has ever beat with a more ardent love of his country than mine—and it is upon my native soil that I stand.') would be set about in the middle of last century, and would show the Australians becoming Australians. And the third, quite modern, would suggest the still further evolution, now obviously necessary, towards a realisation that 'Patriotism is not enough,' and that one's loyalties must be human loyalties rather than national. (MS 4545)

This 'native' soil, or earth, is the basis of nation, but the quotation also raises the ambivalence in Dark's texts, derived from the tension between representing a sense of nationhood without becoming complicit in the boundary-making process, and nationalism, which she so opposed. She constructs a discourse of 'speciality' which sometimes verges on the exotic—as in the depictions of the character of Linda Hendon

in her various environments in *Prelude to Christopher*—a discourse which picks up pace with the trilogy in which she continually alerts readers to the difference of this land, while at the same time deploying the description 'indifferent', saying at one point that its 'difference' was 'indifference' (*Timeless* 59). She also includes immediate conservation issues: the tree felling which had produced such erosion by King's governorship that he had to fine settlers who logged trees along riverbanks; the repetitive failure of crops farmed by European methods; and the disappearance of native animals through excessive hunting, such as the fishing stock around Port Jackson. But, more importantly, she contends that different attitudes to the land signify a cultural 'mis-reading' by both white and black which results in racial tensions which she called, in an article for *Australia Week-End* magazine in 1944, our greatest 'blunder' ('Australia' 10). This mis-reading is fostered by the enduring myths of European culture, the 'ghosts' which plague Dark's colonists, and limit their ability to 'see' difference. It is not just that the 'land' is being ravaged by progress, but that white occupation shows no signs of understanding the process of change. This was an article apparently originally written for an international readership but rejected on the grounds that it was too 'self-critical for American consumption' (MS 4545) and published in Australia by Sydney Ure Smith who felt it would 'fit in with the work of our more contemporary painters' (MS 4545). For Dark's 'timeless' land is not, in fact, unoccupied, contravening the historical concept of *'terra nullius'*. In a later article for *Walkabout* magazine (1951) she specifically counters the ideology of the 'dead' heart 'which seemed to me quite formidably alive' ('They All' 19). More recently, Paul Carter has written of the misrepresentation of the land as inarticulate and silenced, constructed to justify a European occupation (*Lie* 8). In her fiction, Dark recognised and attempted to subvert such constructions within the limits of available discourse: Phillip describes the land as 'Static, a vast, eternal, unmoving emptiness through which the tiny pathway of one's life ran from darkness into darkness, and was lost' (*Timeless* 51) but this is, rather, a recognition of the convention of the 'unknown' land, which she then proceeds to dismantle. The 'land' is named as static but continuously identified as complicit in the process of 'moulding' its human occupants, and vice versa, so that, in fact, the 'land' is mobile and refractory, a kinetic entity which constantly evolves in a process of dialogue with its inhabitants.

It is possible that Dark developed some of these ideas from her reading of Phyllis Kaberry's *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane*, the 1939 publication of Kaberry's doctoral thesis in anthropology.<sup>4</sup> Kaberry specifically mentions the word 'timeless' in describing the landscape of the Kimberley tribes she studied, but she also used other words found frequently in the trilogy or Dark's papers: the term 'alien' is, however, transposed, applied, by Kaberry, to the Aboriginal population in the sense of being 'different' from the whites, whereas Dark's letter, mentioned above, constructs the whites as 'aliens'. More importantly, Kaberry identified the relationship between the landscape and the tribal social structure which was essentially vital and dynamic—native life, she said, must be seen *through* the country (2).<sup>5</sup>

Dark's depiction of this interaction of human and non-human aspects of Aboriginal culture can be read as a spiritual utopia, one of several 'landscapes-as-utopias' examined in her writing. In *Storm of Time* and *No Barrier* Dark posits others: the political 'asylum for mankind' imagined by the Irish convict Matthew Finn in the 'wilderness' of the Blue Mountains (*Storm* 229); the socially-useful suburban utopia in Conor Mannion's turning away from a life of aristocratic patriarchy and her 'rose garden' to begin a more productive life (*Storm* 229);<sup>6</sup> the 'road to the future' glimpsed

by Johnny Prentice in *No Barrier* in which he and his black and white family would live just outside the law and be joined by 'men who might, after all, be ready to turn aside into a wilderness, however forbidding, if there they might find freedom' (381). These dreams are land-centred without the drawbacks of nationalistic boundaries, and appear closer to societies imagined by Ursula Le Guin called 'communitas', that is, structures capable of nurturing individuals in their particular freedoms (16), or perhaps a future bio-regionalism.

The 'land' itself is claimed by Dark as more than a locus of male desire, and constructed in terms of a non-sexual, almost omnipotent, umbrella entity, through descriptions emphasising age, space and time, a 'colossal past' (*Timeless* 276) for example, within which reside a variety of landscapes. A further classification of Dark's 'land' which has been more widely discussed is 'land-as-woman,' or, as I would submit, 'landscape-as-woman'. When Dark portrays Conor Mannion's political awakening in *Storm of Time* as an event which 'took no account of his sex or hers' (557) she is rejecting the history which she said had been 'the story of Man' ('Of Interest') and affirming an inclusive rather than exclusive relationship which is neither a kingdom or a place of exile, but offers possibilities for a political renewal. Yet there are many occasions in which a feminised landscape, as distinct from the 'land,' is constructed by Dark, and usually through the categorisation of 'Nature' as 'She'.

Descriptions such as the land demonstrating a 'silent inviolability which would never give until they had ceased to rob' (*Timeless* 416) provides evidence for interpretations such as Kay Schaffer's summation of Dark's land as 'a silent, maternal body' which defers to the myths of vengeance and absorption (108). But as the narrative of Conor Mannion, and her servant Emily shows, the landscape-as-woman, particularly as ravaged woman, is extended by the landscape of woman-as political-agent in the birth of a new nation, represented in Conor Mannion's identification of her impending motherhood as not 'a personal matter but as a link between the present and the future' (*No Barrier* 200) and the ensuing emphasis in the text on the development of a heritage which will 'suit' the environment.

This tradition of the land as 'ravaged' woman is difficult to displace, however, as Michael Cathcart recently pointed out in relation to both Simon Ryan and Kay Schaffer. Both Ryan and Schaffer have used the explorer Sturt's comments about Central Australia as a land hidden by a 'veil' which could be neither pierced nor raised (7) as a feminisation of the land. Dark also used the term 'veil' in relation to her assessment of D.H. Lawrence's visit to Australia. *Kangaroo*, she says, 'suggests one long, tormented effort to see' (13) and she describes Lawrence as wandering through the pages of the book like a man 'half-blind' who says he can feel, but cannot see, Australia because it is 'beyond the range of our white vision' ('Australia' 13).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Dark queried the role of human occupation of a landscape by considering the power of the notion of 'Nature', first in its romantic associations and later as a stumbling block to harmony itself. In her first novel, *Slow Dawning*, Dark has her protagonist, Valerie Spencer, admit that any landscape needs people, because without people there is no 'Romance' (77-78). In an article written in the 1940s called 'The Conquest of Nature,' apparently unpublished, Dark refers to what she sees as the unsustainable confusion between science and the spiritual, which are both human necessities, and the separation of 'nature' and 'human nature'—which is also queried by contemporary environmental writers. (Eckersley uses the term 'nature' to 'encompass both the human and the nonhuman worlds and avoid the juxtaposition "human vs. nature"'. (187)) She argues that humanity's attempt to vanquish Nature is really

representative of an inner war—man could not rationalise, or govern, his instincts and understand the spiritual or psychological aspects of existence ‘so he fought on two fronts’, projecting his inner war onto the environment, and constructing a conflict between science and religion. In contrast, Aboriginal ‘spiritual comfort’ was derived, speculated Dark, from an acceptance of Nature. It is not surprising, then, that the ‘conquest’ ethos, which Tom Griffiths identifies as the fusion of the two dominant concepts of nineteenth century history, being evolutionary theory and the idea of progress (10), is interrogated so closely in her fiction.

It is also not surprising that ‘landscape-as-heritage’, alluded to in Dark’s letter to William Collins, London, becomes such an important aspect of her writing. These narratives were depicted in Conor Mannion’s birth of an Australian-born child, in which Dark makes much of the promise for the future of a white ‘native-born’ who can speak the language of the land—in other words communicate with it on its own terms, without the restriction of European preconceptions. Likewise, Johnny Prentice experiences the heady mix of blood, soil and sex at an Aboriginal initiation ceremony and feels partly at one with the land (*Timeless* 363).

‘Landscape’ functions chiefly, however, in Dark’s writing as a gauge: characters are ‘measured’ in relation to their response to a range of landscapes. This process, begun in *Prelude to Christopher* when the downfall of a utopian, eugenically-controlled society on Hy-Brazil, is mediated through responses to the lush fertility of the island, and continues in *Return to Coolami* where the fate of protagonists Susan and Brett is decided by their attachment to the pastoral holding of Coolami. In *Sun Across the Sky* Dark examines ideologies of progress through the transition of an idyllic fishing village of Murragoondah into a tourist mecca of Thalassa, and in *Waterway* the members of the harbour community are depicted in their relationship to the coastal habitat. The personal and political crises of *The Little Company* are refracted through both urban and bush environments while the inhabitants of *Lantana Lane* and their small-scale farming, which is respectful of the earth, is the closest Dark can come to the ever-receding utopia of harmony with the environment.

Finally, the complexity of the many associations of ‘land’ and ‘landscape’ was not lost upon Dark. As she undertook a hike through the Wentworth Falls area of the Blue Mountains, carefully recording topographical details for use in the trilogy, she was inspired to quote, in her ‘conversations’ with the land, that masterpiece of understatement of the first fleet observer, Lieutenant Dawes: ‘This country appears not easy of access’ (MS 4545).

#### Notes

- 1 Dark’s father, Dowell O’Reilly, was related to the O’Reillys who are well-known environmentalists in Queensland’s Lamington Plateau. Dark was an avid bushwalker, climber, and gardener with a particular interest in Australian wildflowers. (MS 4545).
- 2 Myles Dunphy, known as the ‘father of the Australian wilderness,’ was instrumental in the Blue Gum Forest campaign to stop logging in this area of the Blue Mountains in the 1930s.
- 3 Yosemite National Park was established in 1890. Dark commented in 1937 on the scenic delights of Yosemite, and, later, the horrors of population-packed New York (ED to Marie O’Reilly 4 September 1937).
- 4 Dark’s other sources included Daisy Bates *The Passing of the Aborigines* (1938) and the work of Professor A.P. Elkin, who also wrote the introduction to Kaberry’s book.
- 5 The term ‘landscape’ is itself problematic. Judith Wright has commented on its inadequacy in describing Aboriginal Australia because it is a ‘European painter’s term’. The word ‘landscape’ came into the English language from the Dutch ‘landschap’ at the end of the sixteenth

- century, and, according to Simon Schama 'like its Germanic root, *Landschaft*, signified a unit of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction' (10). The term was deliberately deployed in Dark's novels, beginning with the reference to 'people' providing the 'romance' of landscape in *Slow Dawning*.
- 6 The metaphor of the bush 'garden' has been discussed by Helen Thomson in 'Gardening in the Never-Never' as a method by which post-Federation writers claimed the bush. (Ferres 35)
  - 7 Continuing the discourse of an 'imagined' country, she described D.H. Lawrence's experiences of Australia in similar terms as those of 'a man half-blind, almost frantic with irritation because the beauty of other lands which he has seen hangs like a veil between him and a beauty which, here, he can only feel' (13).

#### Works cited

- Carter, Paul. *The Lie of the Land*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.
- Cathcart, Michael. 'Eyes of the Beholders.' Rev. of *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*, by Simon Ryan. *The Australian's Review of Books*. March 1997: 6.
- Dark, Eleanor. *Slow Dawning*. London: John Lane, 1932.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Prelude to Christopher*. Sydney: Stephenson, 1934.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Return to Coolami*. London: Collins, 1936.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sun Across the Sky*. London: Collins, 1937.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Waterway*. London: Collins, 1938.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Timeless Land*. Sydney: Collins, 1941.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Storm of Time*. Sydney: Collins, 1948.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *No Barrier*. Sydney: Collins, 1953.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lantana Lane*. London: Collins, 1959.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Australia and the Australians.' *Australia: Week-End Book* 3. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1944. 9-18.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Conquest of Nature.' Eleanor Dark Papers. Mitchell Library. MS 4545.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Of Interest to Women.' Eleanor Dark Papers. Mitchell Library. MS 4545.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Political Parties.' Eleanor Dark Papers. Mitchell Library. MS 4545.
- Dunphy, Myles. 'Blue Mountains National Park Special Supplement.' *The Katoomba Daily*. 24 August 1934. n.p.
- Eckersley, Robyn. *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*. New York: UCL Press, 1992.
- Ferres, Kay, ed. *The Time to Write: Australian Women Writers 1890-1930*. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin, 1993.
- Griffiths, Tom. *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. Cambridge: CUP, 1996.
- Huxley, Aldous. 'The Politics of Ecology: The Question of Survival.' Johnson, Cecil. E. Ed. *Eco-Crisis*. (1970) 24-33.
- Jackson, Peter and Jan Penrose. *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*. London: UCL Press, 1993.
- Modjeska, Drusilla. 'A Hoodoo on That Book': The Publishing Misfortunes of an Eleanor Dark Novel. *Southerly* 57.2 (1997): 73-103.
- Schaffer, Kay. *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*. Sydney: Cambridge UP, 1988.