

The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers. Intro. and ed. CA. Cranston and Robert Zeller. Nature, Culture and Literature 04. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2007, 319pp.

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While wanting if I can to avoid the reviewer's error of over-enthusiasm, I would like to say at once how much pleasure this book gave me. After years of trekking through the deconstructive wastelands, it was a relief to rest in such green pastures, where a tree is seen as a tree, and not just a text. In fact, the essays collected here freshly combine two life-enhancing activities that the literary academy since the eighties has underplayed to its cost—those of reading nature in depth and literature in abundance. Furthermore, in the present environmental crisis, ecocriticism, exemplified here, is the most politically constructive work that literary scholars can aspire to.

The premise uniting these essays is in fact a consensus over a definition for this word. Ecocriticism is 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (7), with the additional insights that 'humans are themselves part of natural systems, affected by them and affecting them in turn' (8); and that every environment is a process rather than a constant (277). Ecocriticism draws on the critic's knowledge of particular places, usually based on personal experience, but also on the sciences, especially ecology. The editors note that informal ecocriticism was being published in the earlier twentieth century. Since the late 1990s studies designated ecocriticism have appeared in North America and Europe, but little has been written in Australia or about Australian environments. The essays in this book are experiments in this unexplored field. They model ecocriticism for the Australian context.

The editors' American and international connections, and the publisher's intention to market *The Littoral Zone* both overseas and in Australia (though expensively in the latter), provide a global perspective from which to view the place-based studies. In fact, the title could be understood to allude to Australia's marginal position in relation to the northern hemisphere, where many of the decisions affecting the global environment are made. The editors explain, however, that 'littoral' refers to both the long, populated coastline of the island continent, and the literary and ecocritical littorals, 'where place meets language' (22).

Far from being confined to coastal Australia, the essays collected here in fact take in a broad Antipodean sweep. They explore the beaches and wheat belt

of Western Australia; the central deserts; the northern coast of New South Wales; the New England tableland; the 'Canberra rift'; south-eastern and northern Queensland; islands adjacent to the temperate and subtropical coasts; and Antarctica. The book's evocations of multiple places balance the convention, maintained since first settlement, of making Sydney and Melbourne, contrasted with an amorphous 'bush', stand as shorthand for the continent's limitless diversity.

A further advantage of ecocriticism, in contrast with approaches that have tended to alienate readers, is an ability to discuss persuasively all literary genres. The recently preferred theories deal insightfully with literary and popular narrative, but less effectively with poetry and non-fictional prose. By contrast, the essays comprising *The Littoral Zone* deal responsively with all literary genres, including drama, and with both high- and low-brow writing. Since of all forms poetry now stands most in need of advocacy, the studies of poetry are especially welcome. In addition, several essays draw attention to the neglected yet prolific genre of Australian nature writing. Yet others derive new knowledge of environmental and human interactions from writings that have little currency outside the regions that produced them.

While the essays collected here are intellectually rigorous and often deeply researched, they are clearly more than academic coterie pieces. This is especially true of the studies of poetry and poets. Zeller and Cranston's introduction opens a discussion that resurfaces intermittently later in the book. The editors recall Les Murray's proposal of a synthesis to be achieved between the 'Athenian' globally-oriented consciousness of urban poets, and the 'Boeotian' ideal—traditional, rural and in Murray's case ensconced in north-eastern New South Wales. 'Boeotian' reverberates with Kate Rigby's innovative select analysis of David Campbell's poetry, which she designates as pastoral and contextualises in the historical ecology of the Canberra plains, a birth place that she shares with Campbell. The same interest, in a landscape worked by and working upon the humans that dwell in it, recurs in Mark Tredinnick's lyrical essay on Robert Gray, whose poetry, like Murray's, claims the New South Wales north coast as home. Tredinnick reads Gray's subject matter and his approach to the poet's task against traditional definitions and examples of pastoral that are based on the word's Latin root:

The poet's duty of care is to shepherd the essence of the things he turns to into the kind of being they can only have in the witness a poet can make. The poet cares with mind and sense and word. Noticing things without using them: this is how poetry can be useful to humanity and serve the world. Caretaking is what it can model: the tough, unsleeping, tender care of the shepherd. It is hard to imagine a more pastoral metaphor for the work of poetry itself. (131)

Judith Wright figures rightly in a book about poetry and the Australian environment. Following on from Tredinnick's essay, Veronica Brady considers thoughts on poetry's higher purposes to be found in W. H. Auden, Mircea Eliade, Martin Heidigger, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hélène Cixous, and Emmanuel Lévinas. Clearly the product of prolonged contemplation and not bound down to 'words. . .white as a stone is white', Brady's short study illuminates Wright's deepening perspectives on the New England tableland where she grew up, as well as some later poetry. This in turn dovetails with Ruth Blair's exposition of poems that Wright wrote while living from 1946 to 1966 on south-east Queensland's Tamborine Mountain. Here she learned to campaign effectively for the environment, notably the Barrier Reef, and formed a mutually productive friendship with fellow-poet, Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Blair explores some of the human and transcendental vistas opened by Wright's observations of the Mount Tamborine birds, as well as her poems about flame trees, whether blazing in quarries or domesticated in gardens.

Bruce Bennett's account of beach literature and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's essay on wheat belt writings are new departures in Western Australian cultural critique. Both contributors personalise their researches beyond academic confines and further demonstrate the capacity of ecocriticism to entertain as well as enlighten. Bennett invites the reader to join him in memories of beaches—'We all have a beach somewhere' (31), while Hughes-d'Aeth explains that the satellite images transmitted in TV weather news reflect the natural bush as green, and crop and pasture areas as yellow. Bennett's essay expands into an overview of the diverse meanings found in beaches by major writers—Robert Drewe, Jack Davis, Randolph Stow, Peter Cowan, Dorothy Hewett and Tim Winton. Hughes d'Aeth uniquely reconstructs the physical processes and environmental consequences of clearing and machine farming the wheat belt, and the disappointments experienced by settlers into the 1950s, from regional histories and from the works of lesser-known authors, such as Cyril E. Goode, J. K. Ewers and James Pollard.

Space does not permit me to do justice to the remaining essays of *The Littoral Zone*, but I can offer a few summarising observations. The first is that a sub-theme concerning the relationship of Australia's indigenous people to the environment and to literature runs through several essays. It surfaces as the main topic in Mitchell Rolls' 'The Green Thumb of Appropriation', which rejects the posing of Aborigines, in books published in the 1980s and 1990s, as environmentalists whose example can cure the greed that dominates the Western way of life. Rolls warns that such images misrepresent Aboriginal culture and ways of relating to country. Secondly, Tom Lynch furthers

understanding of the cultural construction of Australia's deserts, by measuring pastoral reminiscences, novels and travel writings against a scientific recognition of the arid zone's internal particularities and external differences. Finally, contributions by Zeller, Cranston and Elizabeth Leane initiate or advance debate on the literature of other neglected but important littorals, respectively North Queensland; Three Hummock, King, and North Stradbroke Islands; and Antarctica. Leane's original essay interweaves Antarctica's ecology, and the international debates and fragile agreements that comprise its history, with analyses of a representative variety of texts by Australian authors. She rejects the suggestion that imaginative writing may be 'a cultural pollutant blocking access to [a] pristine wilderness', seeing it instead as a way of 'gaining insight into a human relationship' with Antarctica's 'wide white page' (262, 284).

The Littoral Zone presents contemporary ideas and up-to-date science, but maintains the standards of the past in two respects at least. The first is the scholarly care that the editors have brought to their task. For each essay they have provided an abstract, sub-headings, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources. Maps, a comprehensive index, and substantial notes on contributors further assist the reader. Referencing is consistent, and proofing errors are few. Secondly, as demonstrated above, the essays included here return to an older, humane tradition of literary commentary in that they analyse, describe and argue with conviction. Thus they may well persuade a global audience of the urgent need to conserve the littoral Antipodean places that the poets and other writers celebrate in their writings.

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