

Editor's Note

We begin this edition of *AJE* with a Call for Papers on topics to do with Light, or Soil, both of which are this year's subjects for international attention. 2015 is UNESCO's International Year of Light, marking the centenary of Einstein's theory of General Relativity, or  $E=mc^2$  which (according to *Scientific American*) is the most famous equation in the world. Those of us not engaged in the study of physics recognise the equation's transformative aspects as a catalyst for imaginative possibilities in which 'space and time are dynamical and influenced by the presence of matter'; this is the science that provided the exquisite reality of black holes, too gravity-intense for light to escape. You couldn't make it up – the antinomies are sublime. IYL2015 aims 'to raise awareness of how optical technologies promote sustainable development and provide solutions to global challenges in energy, education, agriculture and health'. Truly, it's an exciting year, where deep technology is being applied to promote social environmental justice for those in third-world countries whose use of kerosene lamps costs them their health. The UN warns that inhaling kerosene smoke is equivalent to smoking four packs of cigarettes a day, and the death toll runs at 1.5 million a year. IYL aims to promote portable solar-powered LED lanterns in rural Asia and Africa for those children who work all day and must study at night under carbon-emitting kerosene lamps. Developing and installing high-brightness LED lanterns would also mean that rural hospitals would no longer have to close down at night due to inadequate lighting. (For more IYL information, go to <http://www.light2015.org/Home.html>).

On the topic of natural light, here's a passage from Frances Ratcliffe's *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand: the Adventures of a Biologist in Australia* (1938). Ratcliffe (1904-1970) is out in the forest during the night and hears rustling:

My torch picked out the retreating forms of two kangaroo rats. But that was not all. At the moment that I pressed the switch the ground became studded with myriad points of golden light. They sprang into being wherever the beam fell, only to fade out as it moved. The whole forest floor was spangled. The things could not be glow-worms, as I had at first thought, or they would not have needed my torch to make them shine. I was completely mystified until I knelt down to investigate, and found that they were spiders' eyes! A host of wolf spiders were on the hunt, not in scores, but in thousands. (117)

(More from Ratcliffe in a moment.) 2015 is also the International Year of Soil, a topic instigated by Thailand, which has neither the staff nor the knowledge to practice soil conservation measures, and suffers severe soil erosion especially in the north. Topsoil loss and the loss of organic material impacts on food sustainability; and as UTas soil scientist Richard Doyle puts it: 'We're talking about the material that provides pretty much all the food and fibre for all of humanity, it's not a minor thing'. In his terrific paper 'The Victorian Anthropocene' (this issue), John Plotz notes that the 'most valuable lesson to be learned from [George] Marsh's early effort to theorise the anthropocene may be the amount of emphasis Marsh places on the power of human beings—once they have realised the *unintended consequences* of their actions on their environment—to alter those actions'.

To put that in context we need to go back to 1935 when the CSIR commissioned Francis Ratcliffe to report on Erosion and Soil Drift; this was to be the ‘Drifting Sand’ in the second part of his book *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*. Ratcliffe wrote that ‘man must share the blame with providence for the dust-storms which have increased to plague his existence’ (205). In the book’s Introduction Julian Huxley expresses hope that the book will ‘make the general public more conscious of this assault of civilization upon its own basis’, thus echoing John Plotz in hoping that ‘this sort of reflexivity, the feedback loop between previous environmental missteps and future course corrections’ can transform that action.

Let’s take one last extract from Ratcliffe’s book for an account that captures the imagination of the ‘general public’ while revealing the far-reaching impacts (both horrific and humorous) of soil erosion. Here is Ratcliffe’s description of how sheep ‘in particularly bad storms, scores and even hundreds of sheep will be buried alive. Often when not buried and smothered, their fleeces will collect so much sand that they cannot rise, and they will die of starvation unless they are discovered in time’. One man’s solution was to cart the sheep by lorry to the shearing shed, and in order ‘to free them of some of their sand load, he took them one by one and bounced them upside down on a wire-spring mattress, which he rigged up for the purpose’ (206). And that’s a good yarn to end with in this CFP, based on the 2015 international topics, Light and Soil.

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*AJE* #4 begins with a thoughtful essay from Tom Bristow (U. Melbourne) about British nature poet Alice Oswald’s book-length poem *Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009). This is her second work with a riverine focus, the first being *Dart* (2002), winner of the TS Eliot award. Oswald withdrew her recent work *Memorial* (2011), a rehistoricising of the *Iliad*, from the TS Eliot award to protest its funding by investment company Aurum Funds. *Sleepwalk on the Severn*’s geographic imaginary is Britain’s longest river, flowing from the Welsh Cambrian mountains to the Bristol Channel – its ‘hydrologic cycle and our planet’s relation to its moon’ creates one of the world’s natural wonders, the phenomenon of the Severn bore, a tidal wave that swells the river’s depth by 15 metres, and with a good southwest wind, creates the longest surfing wave in the UK. Its moody human history, however, links it with the slave trade and Clifton Suspension Bridge suicides. This is unspoken baggage, for at the centre of *Sleepwalk* ‘lies a conflation of the feminine gendered moon and an elderly woman dressed in black, pictured against rainfall at night’. As Bristow’s and Oswald’s titles suggest, this is an unconscious world populated by disparate characters, flesh, blood, ghosts – the blind, the indistinct the inaudible, inarticulate, unclear, vague – situated in the endlessly recurring phases of the ‘new moon, half moon, full moon, no moon, moon reborn’. With respect to identity, *Sleepwalk* ‘is racked with disquiet, anxiety and discomfort; it speaks of subjects “struggling”, and then relieved, by an advanced environmental and emotional literacy as the structuring narrative progresses through the phases of the moon’.

Lucy Bleach (U. Tasmania) provides a bird’s eye view in her paper ‘Site Fidelity: Rock Pigeons and Refugees’ originally delivered at ASLEC-ANZ’s Regarding the Earth conference. The paper presents a series of multi-disciplinary artworks developed from collaborations with local Tasmanian pigeon fanciers and homing associations.

Lucy writes that ‘the wild rock pigeons’ cohabitation with humans 10 000 years ago triggered a unique and mutually beneficial association, allowing safe shelter for bird and unprecedented carrier utility for humans. The artworks explore the desire to locate habitat in unstable environments, exposing bespoke ecosystems and visualising agency within a locational / relational feedback loop. The homing instinct of the rock pigeon is segued into the loss of home felt by local refugees. Integral to this process is the participation of members from the ‘Stitch’ group, a program established by Centacare for female refugees. The program is designed to assist women who have endured extreme experiences of dislocation, to learn new language skills, along with sewing techniques, cultural customs, and to make connections within a new community / home. Second-hand garments are cut—fragmented—removed from their form and rearranged by hands metaphorically undergoing a similar process. The garments carry the nostalgia of a previous life / site, and the multiple sentiments of transformation become imbued in their re-stitching and re-fabrication. Homing is an innate instinct to return to known territory via new and unknown environments. The contemporary bird / fancier relationship reveals layers of belonging, between animal, human and place. It more abstractly reflects a desire to be local; to belong within an emotional and spatial system, confronting and navigating tenuous places and experiences’. Lucy Bleach’s latest installation is *superslow*, which examines site and material in relation to geologic and architectural time. It is at the Salamanca Arts Centre until 20 April 2015.

The last paper dealing with the creative arts is David Fonteyn’s essay on the novel. Fonteyn reads Bruce Pascoe’s *Earth* (2001) as an example of what he terms an ‘Indigenous ecological allegory’. Allegories, he writes, contain specific forms and techniques that define a text as an allegory, including an intention written into the text. Allegories also function didactically to educate the reader in a certain way, and, through that education, enable a transformative experience. This, says Fonteyn, is the traditional function of allegory. Pascoe’s novel encodes in allegorical form an Indigenous worldview of the natural world. Many theorists (i.e. David Landis Barnhill, Val Plumwood, Deborah Bird Rose) agree that such a worldview can broadly be termed ecological. The didactic principle is to educate the reader about this Indigenous worldview of Country. As the reader comes to an understanding of Country, the narrative events—which describe a colonial (1880s) war between non-indigenous and indigenous people, as well as the language that encodes those events—become re-interpreted through this alternative metaphysics. Pascoe’s novel utilises medieval allegorical forms, techniques and strategies in order to expose the narratives and language of the Australian Tradition to the language of the ‘other’ of Indigenous Country, that is (more specifically) the Wathaurong language and the worldview that it encodes. Pascoe uncovers a polysemy that has developed within the English language in its encounter with the Indigenous people. Finally, Fonteyn argues that while allegory has yet to be studied in ecocriticism as a form for writing nature, it is an ideal literary form in which Nature and an ecological worldview may be portrayed in a written text. Fonteyn’s previous work on allegory, Randolph Stow’s *Tourmaline*, appeared in JASAL 2010 ‘Currents, Cross-Currents, Undercurrents’ eds. Frances Devlin-Glass and Tony Simoes da Silva.

When I communicated with John Plotz (Brandeis University) he was shovelling snow from his back deck in Boston. He even says he loves the stuff but that he enjoyed winter in Far North Queensland last year as well. John attended the Affective Habitus conference and his paper ‘The Victorian Anthropocene: George Marsh and the

Tangled Bank of Darwinian Environmentalism' is published here. Although George Marsh (1801-1882) was from away, as author of *Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864) his importance extends beyond being one of the first writers to address environmental destruction as a result of human activities. Plotz's abstract reads 'There is an important 19th century turning-point in thinking about the Anthropocene. Vermont environmentalist George Marsh's 1864 *Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* is a seminal account of how the unintended consequences of human action give humans a previously unsuspected role to play in secular terrestrial change. The role that Darwinian 'natural materialism' played in shaping Marsh's insights is profound, and grasping the particular developments in biological thinking that made his work feasible casts a useful side-light on our own current assumptions about humanity's relationship to the environment, and suggests some ways of thinking about which of those assumptions have the potential to shape further thought and large-scale human action. John Plotz was the John Simon Guggenheim Fellow in 2011-2012; his particular area of study is Victorian literature and Politics and aesthetics.

REVIEWS: The books reviewed in this issue are John Ryan's *Green Sense: the Aesthetics of Plants, Place and Language* (2012); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed. *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013), and Alice Curry's *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (2013).

Barbara Holloway begins her review of John Ryan's *Green Sense: the Aesthetics of Plants, Place and Language* (2012) by stating that 'The wild flowers of Western Australia have been visited, studied, written, painted and celebrated over decades, but never like this. They are, in all the diversity of species, habitat and history John Ryan lays out, also the world of his deeply thoughtful, thoroughly documented and trenchantly argued advocacy of bodily, multisensory engagement with plants, and engagement with language itself as a living entity'. Barbara is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University, with the School of Languages, Literature and Linguistics 2014-2015.

'As a collective, the essays in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (2013) mark an inspiring new direction in ecophilosophical and ecocritical thinking. With caution towards viewing ecology (solely) in terms of "green", *Prismatic Ecology* is a timely encouragement to think carefully about the symbols we use to represent the world, whilst finding within the colour spectrum a range of motifs to express and drive different ways of thinking about human and other-than-human interaction'. Reviewer Nick Kankahainen (Monash University) is interested in tropes of silence in colonial and contemporary non-indigenous experiences of Australian landscapes.

Deirdre Kessler reviews *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (2013) by Alice Curry. This is an intelligent and highly-readable text in which Curry has 'explored ecofeminist philosophical and ethical insights and applied them to current theorising on subjectivity, identity formation and agency within children's literature'. Curry's geo-spatial coverage is said to be 'the landscapes of America, Britain, Australasia, and South Africa in post-apocalyptic and post-disaster worlds in contemporary young adult fiction'. The reviewer noted, however, that the Australasian section is represented by one author, from NZ. For those interested in Young Adult Fiction, I suggest Deborah Jordan's *Climate Change Narratives in*

*Australian Fiction* (2014). Jordan includes Alison Stewart's *Days Like This As the World Grows Older, It's Dangerous Being Young* (2011); Francis Bodkin's *D'harawal Seasons and Climate Cycles* (2008); John Coetzee's *Dance of the Freaky Green Gold* (2008), and Victor Kelleher's *Red Heart* (2001). Deirdre Kessler is the author of seventeen books for young people, including Canadian Children's Book Centre Award-winning *Brupp Rides Again* and *Lobster in My Pocket*. She teaches children's literature and a course on Lucy Maud Montgomery with the Department of English, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada. Her most recent publications are a memoir, *Mother Country* (Oberon Press, 2014), and *Born! A foal, five kittens, and Confederation* (The Acorn Press, 2014).

And finally, this year two more volumes of *AJE* will be published, one by returning guest editor, Kate Rigby (Monash), in conjunction with Anne Collett (Wollongong), based on the Cultural Responses to Environmental Disasters workshop, hosted in Copenhagen, and also from the European Association for Studies on Australia (EASA) conference, 'Encountering Australia'. The December issue of *AJE* will be guest-edited by ASLEC-ANZ Past-President Tom Bristow (Melbourne), and will feature papers from the joint ASLEC-ANZ, ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions; and Minding Animals International partner event, held in 2014. I will as ever be hovering behind the software. We'd also like to thank Lorraine Shannon for her help with *AJE* in the past, and we wish her well.

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