

## BOOK REVIEW:

*HEARTLAND: THE REGENERATION OF RURAL PLACE, BY GEORGE MAIN. PUBLISHED IN 2005 BY UNSW PRESS, SYDNEY. ISBN: 9780868408736 (PAPERBACK), 304 PAGES*

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In *Heartland*, George Main presents a beautifully written and highly personal account of the ecological destruction of rural places, induced, in large part, by the application of an export-oriented model of agriculture. His exposition – part scholarly critique, part essay – is empirically grounded in the Cootamundra district on the south-west slopes of New South Wales: the place of Main's birth and the traditional site of the Wiradjuri people whose forced dispossession from the land is intricately connected to its present state of ecological disorder. What was once an area of grassy woodlands and swamps, carefully tended by the Wiradjuri and teeming with small animals, birds and native plants, has now been transformed into a well-groomed landscape of crops and pastures, littered only by a few remnant trees and the occasional patch of land left for regeneration. For many, such changes are a sign of progress; the ascendancy of science over nature; of human beings over a harsh and untamed landscape; of order where once there was disorder. Yet, the consequences are both profound and troubling. Like many parts of rural Australia, Cootamundra is now beset by a range of ecological challenges, including species loss, soil acidification, salinity, erosion, insects that have become chemical-resistant, and an overall instability and vulnerability of farm land.

Now working as a curator at the National Museum of Australia, Main's background as an environmental historian comes through clearly in his analysis of the ecological disorder facing the Cootamundra region. While he is not alone in his environmental critique of modern agriculture – as he himself acknowledges – he goes beyond those who seek solutions within policy frameworks of 'sustainable development' or 'natural resource management', insisting that these terms merely cast people as 'outside' nature, in relations of domination and control over natural resources. The effect of this position, he argues, is that it limits opportunities for dialogue between people and rural places, and prevents the integration of agricultural lands into the complex living systems of which they were once part. This, he suggests, is a stark contrast to the ways of the Wiradjuri who, far from seeing themselves as divorced from the land, operate within a holistic cultural framework that ties them inextricably to biological communities.

In his critique of the dominant discourses of natural resource management, Main reveals how they remain embedded within the same cultural paradigm of modern agricultural production that lead to the ecological destruction of rural landscapes in the first place. To trace how this broad cultural framework of productivism came into being, he takes an historical perspective by asking: 'what dynamics of imagination

and history transformed the grassy woodlands and swamps of Wiradjuri country into a modern agricultural region? What particular habits of thought and perception delivered dryland salinisation, soil erosion, dying paddock trees, local extinctions? What cultural processes maintain the dominant model of industrial agriculture?' By showing how these models are historically and culturally contingent, it becomes possible to imagine alternative forms of engagement with rural places in ways that might 'return ecological wellbeing and natural productivity to the agricultural heartlands of Australia' (pp.8-9).

Main addresses these questions in chapters appropriately entitled *Mastery, Elsewhere, Progress, Division, Silence, Revolt* and *Regeneration*, and identifies the underlying beliefs and practices of modern agriculture that have brought about the destruction of the once richly productive and ecologically diverse slopes of the Cootamundra district.

He begins by documenting how European settlers sought to 'master' the land, both in terms of attempts to secure grazing land through the violent dispossession of traditional owners, and in a desire to 'tame' the landscape and render it suitable for agricultural production via practices of tree-clearing and chemical fertilisation. Underpinning such practices, he argues, are representations of the Australian rural landscape as, on the one hand, an inhospitable and harsh place that needs to be controlled, and, on the other, as a resource that only gains its value through export-based relationships of production and consumption with distant spaces. While farmers must respond to externally driven economic forces, these globalised market structures are unresponsive to the ecological needs of particular agricultural regions, which undermines the potential for what Main calls 'relationships of intimacy and care' between people and the land (p.48).

Moreover, if we insist on viewing such processes in terms of a linear narrative of 'progress', Main argues, ecological destruction becomes merely an inevitable, if unfortunate, outcome of human advancement, which can be fixed with the further application of scientific knowledge. Stories of progress and colonisation also silence other narratives of change in Cootamundra – the decline of local ecologies, the dispossession of the Wiradjuri and the displacement of rural families by global competition and mechanisation – and allows the ethical obligation to accept responsibility for past injustices against indigenous people and nature to be evaded. *Heartland* brings these alternative narratives to the fore, and begins an important process of de-legitimising presently dominant ways of knowing and engaging with the land.

Main presents his argument through a combination of personal narrative and scholarly prose, drawing on a disparate range of intellectual sources from a broad suite of disciplines – Max Horkheimer, Neil Murray, Vandana Shiva, Wendell Berry, Val Plumwood and Geoffrey Blainey. His approach is strongly historical, infused with elements of ecology, anthropology, sociology, and literary studies, and he combines scholarly texts with historical data (letters, diaries, oral histories), personal reflections, anecdotal tales and conversations with local people living in the region. The academic critique is powerful and compelling but the personal dominates as Main tells the story in first person voice of his family's settlement of, and subsequent departure from, the land, and of his more recent visits to the area as an adult. This practice of combining scholarly writing with literary prose does not always sit comfortably with the

academic reader but the book is certainly a pleasure to read, due in no small part to Main's obvious talents as a writer. He is clearly knowledgeable about the local ecology of the region and describes, in rich detail, his encounters with the place during his return journeys. In this sense, the account is a very personal one. On occasions, it risks becoming self-indulgent but never quite to the extent that it alienates the reader.

Nevertheless, the academic parts of Main's argument are often buried among the personal stories and the flow from the personal to the scholarly, and back again, is occasionally clumsy. This is most noticeable in the early chapters of book where even the smallest piece of information gleaned from historical sources is inserted into the text. For those local to the area, this inclusion of family genealogies is bound to please, but the overall effect is slightly distracting. Intentionally or otherwise, the easy flow between personal anecdote and scholarly critique also creates confusion as to the nature of Main's scholarly claims and the evidence provided to support his argument. Is he suggesting, for example, that Alex Hansen's debilitating headaches disappear when he visits the forested hills of Pioneer Park because he has a 'physical connection to the land' that creates a mutual sense of healing? Perhaps Main never intended for such conclusions to be drawn but the inclusion of this sort of detail leaves one wondering how far he wishes to go with his spiritual assertions.

book is not a standard academic text and will surely not appeal to those seeking straightforward answers to environmental problems. Indeed, the alternatives put forward by Main require a fundamental reassessment of what have become fairly deep-rooted cultural assumptions and practices in Australian farming, and change becomes even more inconceivable as rural landscapes are increasingly bound up in global power networks of production and consumption. Nevertheless, the message of *Heartland* is an inspiring one, and it will appeal to a far wider audience than conventional academic writings. I encourage you all to read it.