Book Review

Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939

Author: David Walker
Publisher: University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, 1999.

Australia’s proximity to Asia has contributed to shaping and defining our cultural identity and values. At the recent ICOMOS conference on World Heritage in Canberra (18–19 November 2000) several speakers commented on the discrepancy between World Heritage places inscribed for cultural values in contrast to natural values. Australia and New Zealand, with their populations of mainly European origin, are distinctive in having places listed predominantly for natural values or natural and indigenous cultural values but with no places inscribed solely for cultural values. This is in sharp contrast to Europe, where most places are listed for cultural values. One speaker questioned whether non-indigenous Australians are not yet comfortable with their cultural identity in Australia, suggesting this may be partly because the former cultural connections with a shared past in Europe have been cut, and as a modern Western society we are disconnected from our sense of place.

David Walker’s book, Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939, contributes to this debate on cultural identity, analysing the anxieties we Australians have faced as a Western nation in the Asia Pacific region and discussing challenges to establish legitimacy for settlement in Australia. Walker examines the discourse between Australia and Asia and demonstrates that there were many voices and very differing conceptions of Asia. Australia was coming to nationhood at a time when Europe’s dominance was starting to be challenged by Asia, and Australia seemed, because of its proximity, as if it would become the most Asianised. Drawing on history, literature and art, he outlines the often-conflicting views and perceptions within Australia on Asia, showing the shifts of interest in and anxieties about Asia throughout the period. With irony and humour he demonstrates how the majority negative approach has been transformed over time into a positive view.

This book brings together an impressive range of issues and themes about Asia in Australian society, which is most valuable for cultural heritage professionals working in Asia. Although there are almost no Asian voices to be heard, either from within Australian society or providing commentary from Asia, Walker’s analysis provides an important context for understanding the issues and debates that have left imprints in our cultural heritage and the ways we perceive the world.

Walker commences with Asia as the ‘Antique Orient’, often depicted as majestic ruins crumbling in deserts or overgrown in jungles. He shows how this image was overcome by the fear, at the end of the 19th century, that there was an aggressive Asia, resentful of European domination and ready to unleash a ‘rising tide’ of people into northern Australia. For the Australian population of four million mostly Anglo-Celtic settlers in 1900 struggling to establish themselves in a seemingly hostile environment far from Europe, these fears were heightened by invasion narratives that drew on the contemporary issues of high rates of

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urbanisation, small population and declining birth-rate. The notion of a vanishing race was central to the invasion narrative. Another anxiety underscored in these narratives was that cities, with their high levels of urbanisation, were a corrosive force while the bush would retain its moral values.

One theme of the book is understanding attempts to define the nature of the continent. A challenge facing the new Commonwealth was that of peopling the north. Already in 1829, Edward Gibbon Wakefield had commented on Australia’s proximity to Asia, believing that Chinese settlers could turn the wilderness into a garden. For a century Australia’s entitlement to the ‘Empty North’ was questioned by the perceived failure to colonise it successfully. Asian nations may have a stronger claim than the ‘s omnolent’ whites. There appeared to be two terrifying prospects: invasion or dispossession through negligence or incompetence. To fill the ‘emptiness’ it was widely believed Australia needed to attract millions of white settlers.

In the chapter ‘Space Becomes Place’ Walker outlines the history of the academic specialists, in particular geographer Griffin Taylor who attempted to persuade Australians that much of the country was barren and dense settlement of the north was not viable. Fiery debates raged in which the patriot Randolph Bedford refuted the word ‘desert’ and claimed areas like Lake Eyre had staggering potential as the world’s greatest rice field. To Bedford and others, the words ‘desert’ and ‘tropics’ both had Oriental associations that had no place in their vision of a productive Australian nation. By the 1930s, as more realistic views of the population gained acceptance, Australians started to congratulate themselves on their achievements in settling harsh environments. Similarly, while popular commentators continued to characterise the cities as being morally corrupt, social scientists were redefining and explaining the city as part of the larger task of redefining Australia itself and defending Australia’s record of settlement.

In demonstrating how the issue of Asia recurs throughout Australian history, Walker deftly weaves together the threads of the multiple ‘Asias’ that Australians encountered. He introduces Australians who were interested in Asia and believed that Australia had much to learn from these differing ‘Asias’. With the rapid and enthusiastic acceptance of Japonaise many Australian commentators in the late-19th century recognised values in Japan that were being destroyed by encroaching industrialisation in the West. The Japanese veneration of art and craft traditions was favourably compared with Elizabethan England. In Brisbane, in 1887, a traditional Japanese house was designed, built and decorated by Japanese using imported materials for Judge Paul. However, by the beginning of the 20th century Japan was increasingly perceived as being militaristic and this view was confirmed in its defeat of Russia in 1905. Yet, when the Japanese navy sent training squadrons to Australia in 1903 and 1906, Australians turned out to welcome the sailors in great numbers, to the outrage of The Bulletin and other publications. Women were singled out as being unreliable for welcoming the Japanese. Despite the criticisms, women continued to welcome the visitors as shown in the photo of
two women relaxing on a bench between two Japanese officers during the First World War. However, the Japanese visits were overshadowed by the visit of the US ‘Great White Fleet’ in 1908, which drew bigger crowds than the inauguration ceremonies for the Commonwealth in January 1901. The visit became a catalyst for Australian vulnerabilities and the Admiral of the Fleet wrote that ‘the Asiatic question causes great excitement here.’

Walker gives voice to other contributors, the elite minority who saw the need for a closer engagement with Asia. The first New South Wales trade commissioner, J.B. Suttor, appointed in 1903, consistently advocated a closer study of Asian cultures. Members of the Institute of Pacific Relations in the 1920s and 1930s were especially committed to changing the ways Australians perceived the region they were located in. Walker suggests that, in doing so, they became more interested in understanding Australian opinion and the nature of Australian values.

In answer to the question as to whether we are disconnected from our sense of place, Walker demonstrates that we have much to celebrate in our journey of discovery of this fascinating, challenging continent. Our journey continues and we need to make sure Dr Fu Manchu, that malevolent character who slinks through the book feeding on fears real and imagined, is never shadowing us.
Book Review

A Geography of Heritage: Power, Culture and Economy

Authors: Brian Graham, G.J. Ashworth and J.E. Tunbridge

At first glance it may be surprising that such a definitive study of heritage has been written by three geographers – though the more one reads, the clearer the relevance of the geographic perspective becomes. For defined very broadly, geography is concerned with space and place – the ‘where’ and the ‘what’ of places and spaces, and the meanings they have had for people in the past and present.

There is an obvious symmetry with the definition that the authors give of heritage as ‘the contemporary use of the past’ (p. 2) as it manifests itself in the environment in which people live. Heritage is what helps define and give meaning to people’s cultural identity and crystallises their sense of place.

A Geography of Heritage is not a manual that seeks to describe and apply heritage conservation skills to given objects at specific locations, but it places heritage within a theoretical framework and so grounds it in contemporary social theory. The authors’ text is very effective in revealing how heritage and the way it is perceived and managed is a cultural, political and economic manifestation of a people’s identity. Here the time factor is also seen to be crucial, in that political and/or cultural changes become mirrored in the relative value that is placed on a given aspect of heritage and how it is managed.

The major parts of the book reflect the above paradigm of study. A brief Part I establishes the conceptual framework of the whole book. Part II deals with the role of heritage as a cultural phenomenon. Here the social and political uses of heritage and the way these are frequently contested are examined. In essence, it is a consideration of the relationship between heritage and identity. There is some very interesting illustrative material from France and Ireland on the symbolism attached to war memorials and cemeteries, the role of language and its manifestation in public signs in Canada and central Europe, and the political potency of holy sites in various regions of India and China.

Chapter 4 of Part II addresses the issue of the multiplicity of meanings that heritage can have, depending on the cultural or ethnic group that is being asked. The rise of multi-cultural national identities, as well as the targeted marketing of heritage to attract specific groups as consumers, have both contributed to this development. Sometimes such differences in heritage perception have led to conflict. The authors refer to this as the ‘dissonance of heritage’. The final chapter of this part of the book ranges far and wide to present case studies of the management of such heritage dissonance. The USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Singapore, and Western Europe are discussed in considerable detail. This is the point where the synergy between heritage studies and the new cultural geography becomes most apparent.

Part III introduces the economic perspective of heritage. Right at the beginning of this section the dichotomy between what many people perceive as the ‘aesthetically sublime’ and the ‘commercially mundane’ (p. 129) of heritage is boldly stated.
However, in a simple, direct argument the case for the economic consideration is made: ‘heritage costs money...[but]...heritage is worth money and also earns it’ (p. 130). The complexities of putting a value on heritage are discussed in general terms, which then leads, a little precipitously, to the description of various concepts of value identified by economists, and the rationale for public intervention to ensure heritage preservation.

But perhaps the most valuable aspect of the authors’ approach is their consideration of the issue of heritage within a series of economic models. They are explained with minimal use of economic jargon and set out in considerable detail. These models, in turn, classify the role of the economics of heritage as a by-product of other prime considerations, or as one or other aspect of a diverse conservation and marketing strategy, not to mention as an exercise in commodification and packaging. The last model called ‘An economic systems model’ is the least satisfactory. It shows that certain concepts taken from physical environmental management (‘output equity’, ‘self-balancing system’) are less adaptable for use in cultural heritage management.

The final chapter of Part III is less original than those just discussed, but nonetheless well argued. It looks at the role of heritage in the image making of places and regions with some interesting data from the Netherlands as an illustration. The role of heritage in the tourism industry, local heritage in urban neighbourhood regeneration and the use of heritage in local economic development strategies are described. The last topic is made vivid through the introduction a case studies as diverse as the Groningen Museum, the restoration of the Temple Bar area of Dublin, and the creation of a heritage industry around the Mexican arts, crafts and buildings of Santa Fe in the United States.

The final section of the book (Part IV) develops ideas, some of which have already been introduced in Chapters 2 and 3. It looks at the meaning and management of heritage at various scales: the global, the national and the local. Models that show the typology of heritage locations and patterns, as well as the expansion of heritage precincts, are an original contribution to this topic (pp. 209 & 213). The framework of the authors’ approach may be spatial, but the socio-cultural dimension is never far from the surface, as the heading ‘Managing Contending Heritage’ indicates. Also, inherent in the descriptions of some of the local heritage management projects is the question: What is genuine? What is contrived? The wide-ranging illustrative material and case studies make this section of the book vivid and easy to read.

Finally, the issue of the global scale of heritage is addressed. Here the question, ‘Who owns the past?’ is introduced and issues rarely canvassed in such a general text are mentioned: the question of war booty that is not returned (e.g. Soviet confiscation of German art treasures after 1945), the removal of heritage items by foreign archaeological teams or their governments, and international trade in heritage items. However, if there is a global human heritage, then the actual location of such items is less important then their mode of presentation and ease of
access. This point is inherent in the case studies of Robben Island (South Africa) and the walled city of Quebec (Canada) with which this book ends.

To conclude, *A Geography of Heritage* is a wide-ranging treatment of its theme and a text that can be recommended for students. For practitioners in the field, it may help crystallise the ultimate meanings inherent in their work and the contradictions with which they are sometimes confronted.
Book Review

Principles of Environmental and Heritage Law

Author: Maurice Evans
Publisher: Prospect Publishing, St Leonards, New South Wales, 2000.

Books written on Cultural Heritage law and practice in Australia are so few and far between that any new volume is welcome. Apart from the privately published Australian Mosaic, sections of Bates well-known text Environmental Law in Australia and the equivalent work by Ramsay & Rowe on Environmental Law, there is virtually nothing available for the general reader wanting to know about the law in relation to the cultural heritage in Australia. Although Evan’s book primarily focuses as an (academic) New South Wales text, in that the detailed information relates primarily to that State, it is an interesting and valuable addition to the small number of books and articles on heritage conservation law available in Australia.

The title is somewhat misleading, but immediately indicates that the book is primarily about New South Wales. There is really little about what in Australia is commonly called ‘environmental heritage law’ (as opposed to cultural heritage law) – and it indicates the State perspective the publication takes – New South Wales being the only State in which the phrase ‘environmental heritage’ is used in this sense! Its concentration on New South Wales cases and issues generally, and the Opera House issue in particular, emphasises this fact.

While it contains much interesting material on the evolution and theories behind laws to protect the National Estate in Australia, the content shows it to be a doctoral thesis turned into a popular publication. An interesting academic achievement nevertheless – incorporating some novel theories and reiterating many well accepted ones – it is not really a publication of day to day use by the ICOMOS practitioner, except perhaps when dealing with the issues concerning heritage matters in New South Wales. The author has taken an interesting approach in that, while the book purports to be a legal text, there is a great deal of interesting (though in some cases some people may say debatable - and that is not a bad thing in itself) material on the philosophy and societal principles behind Australian conservation law and practice.

The book is presented in four parts. The first deals with the author’s general assessment of the many principles purported to be behind the practice of conservation generally and in New South Wales in particular. The second deals with the present International (the usual overemphasis on the World Heritage Convention), Australian, New South Wales and local approaches to conservation law in Australia. The third deals almost exclusively with Sydney and the Opera House debate, with some final material on future directions. The fourth section consists of a number of useful appendices (almost a quarter of the book) – as well as a very substantial bibliography, but again mainly of books and articles relating to principles rather than of actual conservation practice.

Although heritage conservation practitioners may not agree with all of the Author’s concepts of heritage conservation and its roots in Australia, this book is comprehensive and one of the few texts presently available on the subject as it is applied in Australia. Practitioners in New South Wales will find it particularly useful.

Peter James

Peter James is a lawyer with over 30 years experience in the heritage legislation and conservation practice field. He works extensively throughout Australia and overseas, is director of JNP Pawsey & Prowse Land Use Planners and has been the Chairman of the Tasmanian Heritage Council since its inception in 1997. He lectures in heritage law at the University of Tasmania.