FOREWORD

Reflections on the future of Past Cultural Landscapes

As a foundation member of Australia ICOMOS and of the Australian Heritage Commission, I enjoyed this seminar for its perceptions, evidence of sound research and its expression of conservation common sense. It is interesting to reflect that, although this meeting was well attended, very few participants were present at Beechworth only ten years ago, when ICOMOS Australia was inaugurated. I will return to the implications of this later.

The outstanding feature of this meeting has been its stress upon the need to bring a diversity of disciplines to bear on any true assessment of a cultural landscape. This is heartening revisionism. A decade and more ago, apologists for conservation too often highlighted their particular interest to the neglect of other disciplines. Possibly many do so still. Speaking generally, while buildings and architectural interests predominated at Beechworth, they are conspicuous by their absence here.

In my opinion, conservationists of all persuasions must discard two obsessions before the ideals expressed at this conference can become affective. The first is the tunnel vision of disciplinary 'relevance': that blinkered enthusiasm which promotes one narrow concern. The earliest history of the National Trust seems redolent of specific and narrow aims. Equally at fault are environmentalists who limit their scope to the preservation of a single species of plant or animal, while neglecting wider collaboration. Possible is the reason why, as an archaeologist involved in the Gordon-Franklin dam debate, I initially found marked lack of interest in the Aboriginal prehistory cause from many environmental conservationists. The fact that humans occupied southwest Tasmania during ice age times, before the forests developed their impenetrability, perhaps ruined their idealistic concept of a timeless 'Wilderness'.

The second, but related fault concerns the reinvention of wheels by disciplines as they discover the truth that humanity and the natural world interact and change dynamically. Several speakers evidently have grasped this reality, unaware that other disciplines preceded them. Prehistorians have preached this doctrine for almost three decades. Few years before Beechworth, Rhys Jones coined the term 'firestick farming' for the human ecology of Aboriginal Australia.

Perceptive early explorers, directly in contact with Australia’s first colonists, expressed an awareness of this interacting cultural landscape, but over a century of historians of exploration ignored it. Consider the observation of Ludwig Leichhardt:

"The natives seemed to have burned the grass systematically along every watercourse, and around every waterhole, in order to have them surrounded with young grass as soon as the rain sets in ... It is no doubt connected with a systematic management of their runs, to attract game to particular spots, in the same way that stockholders burn parts of theirs ..."

L. Leichhardt, Journal, 1847

Speakers voiced their pessimism and disillusion concerning the current Australian situation in conservation, and I sympathise. However, there is much to be proud about, and I urge a more positive, optimistic philosophy which emphasises the victories rather than the defeats. Conferences abound, for example, with niggles and doubts concerning the Burra Charter as a way of life. Doubtless it is an imperfect document and time will produce modifications, but consider the Australian world before the Hope Inquiry, progenitor of ICOMOS Australia and the Australian Heritage Committee. I wonder how many present have read the Hope Report, or the 1981 Heritage Commission re-assessment?

Read them as yardsticks to what was. You might also read my strictures concerning the architectural profession, presented at Beechworth in 1978 and at the Goulburn National Trust 1979 Conference. My own opinions may have been erroneous, but I suggest that you compare the pre-1978 profession of historical 'restoration' architecture with the rewarding work of many architects since that time.

Maintain standards within each discipline, but broaden horizons to embrace other disciplines, attend conservation conferences with the assumption that they are relevant, and our heritage of cultural landscapes will be the beneficiary.

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