

BOOK REVIEW

Taming the Great South land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia

by William Lines

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Reviewed by D.G. Hird.

Two centuries of Australia's environmental, social and political history are narrated in bold style in this volume. Indeed, a sorry sequence of events from the early unregulated seal and whale slaughters through the extensive clearing for agriculture to more recent engineering feats and wholesale forestry programs is documented in spirited style. Fundamental to the conquest of nature was the displacement of aboriginal Australians, including by massacre and catastrophic epidemic disease. The author links these processes to the employment of foreign capital and laws which, often in the name of an "Enlightenment" philosophy, have so changed the continent and indeed the recent world.

Most of the historical incidents described here are graphic. Devastation began early, not just with formal colonisation and implementation of British law, but often also in unregulated ways. No party to the settlement process is spared in this account. The treatment of aboriginals is particularly saddening. Acclimatisers receive vilification, so also do many who welcomed localised resemblance of naturalised environments to those of the admirer's home country. As mechanisation developed into the twentieth century contentious projects such as the damming of Lake Pedder and proposals including the use nuclear-explosives to clear channels through the Great Barrier Reef draw critical attention. Topicality is maintained through criticism of current proposals including those of the Very-Fast-Train and the Multi-Function-Polis.

While it is impossible to deny that Australia has been deeply and often environmentally despoiled, I nonetheless found difficulty with several aspects of this book. The first was with accuracy; for example on page 12 aborigines are described as "having an interconnected culture across Australia" - what about Tasmania where 10-12 thousand years of separation was one of the most significant known isolation events in human history? On the same page Western Australian deserts are described as Australia's only undegraded land - apparently despite the presence of feral pests such as the rabbit and domestic cat and the concomitant loss of native fauna. Second, I found it difficult to find due credit to early advocates of the protection of natural heritage. For example, Charles Darwin and John Gould expressed concern and regret at the treatment of aboriginals and the thylacine respectively in their visits to Tasmania in the 1830's and 1840's. Similarly, scientists tend to be assumed to be invariably in league with developers throughout this book, the great increase in conservation effort and research of recent decades receives little acknowledgement. Third, hindsight seems to be vigorously applied, such as in the foreseeable effects of acclimatised species. We now know too well of the defencelessness of many native species and of the futility of attempting to cultivate fragile soil types. Finding cures for problems such as those of feral species are seldom as easy as attributing blame.

I found this volume a provocative sequel to books like A.J. Marshall's *The Great Extinction*. It concludes with advocacy of eco-activism and is reminiscent of this genre of environmental concern; Tasmanian readers might note that it is dedicated in part to the "Earth First" group. This book is an evocative and anguished view of an important part of the environment and conservation spectrum.