

KEN GELDER

the man of
feeling

PETER READ

Haunted Earth

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Haunted Earth is the third book in a trilogy by eco-historian Peter Read that began with *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (1996). His first book had an interesting but curious point to make: that non-Aboriginal people in Australia could be dispossessed (for example, by losing their property through natural disasters) just as Aboriginal people have been, and that as a consequence of this kind of experience their sense of belonging would in fact be substantially deepened. In this account, non-Aboriginal people seemed to need to be dispossessed in order to claim precisely the kind of intimacy with land felt by Aborigines themselves. To lose a place, in other words, increases one's attachment to it: one belongs properly or authentically only *after* one has been dispossessed. His point had something strangely and literally postcolonial about it, mapping non-Aboriginal people onto the predicament of Aborigines after colonisation as if their traumas could somehow now be shared. It also offered a pathway for settler Australians to imagine themselves as 'indigenous', sewing an ideology of reconciliation seamlessly together with settler self-legitimation during the 1990s, especially for those already identified as 'native born'.

The second book in Read's trilogy, *Belonging* (2000), continued to merge non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal senses of land intimacy, although it occasionally expressed anxieties about the politics of this kind of project. What does it do to the specificity of Aboriginal claims for Native title, for example? Most of Read's non-Aboriginal examples were (and still are) farmers,

pastoralists, cattlemen, rural landowners: how 'Aboriginal' can these people actually be? It didn't help to find Read masking the politics of his predicament by casting their relationship to property as, first and foremost, a matter of deeply felt emotion. His books are full of people whose relation to land and property is conceived sentimentally and described in order to provoke a sentimental effect. Some readers may very well shed a tear as they work through these intimately rendered narratives, and they are no doubt meant to. Read's writing is always up close and personal, a tribute to just how deeply some people actually feel about the landscapes they have grown up in and—since their dispossession is always temporary (because, of course, they are non-Aboriginal)—continue to inhabit.

In Read's work, emotion is the key and sentiment is the logic: he is, to draw on the title to the Scottish writer Henry Mackenzie's famous 1771 sentimental novel, a man of feeling. Indeed, the eighteenth-century sentimental novel offers some instructive comparisons with Read's work. It had tied a character's virtue to his or her capacity to invoke powerfully felt sympathetic emotions—and certainly all of Read's interviewees are virtuously cast in this respect. *Haunted Earth* is structurally similar to Mackenzie's novel: in both cases the narrator listens to the heart-rending stories of others (who, in Mackenzie, have also usually lost something). Emotion in the sentimental novel was seen as something good in itself, its own reward. But it also produces a kind of egalitarianism, since everyone—no matter what

their class—has in common the ability to feel deeply. In Read's work class is hardly an issue worth reflecting on, and he seems disdainful of sociology. Instead, it is the capacity to feel deeply about the land that produces the sort of 'egalitarianism' he is searching for between settler Australians and Aboriginal people, as if everyone is (or should be) able to feel this in equal measure. This is Read's version of reconciliation.

Sentimentality in the eighteenth century was projected onto the landscape and linked to the sublime, all of which are similarly activated in Read's work where belonging can sometimes offer its settler-subjects a glimpse of the infinite. But it was also associated with the irrational, the supernatural; the sentimental novel and the Gothic novel developed in tandem. Perhaps it isn't surprising, then, that the last book in Read's trilogy, *Haunted Earth*, is utterly preoccupied with ghosts and apparitions, each of which provokes an emotional/sympathetic response. These things seem, in fact, to be all over the place—and Read spends the book following them across the length and breadth of Australia, embarking on a sentimental journey (if I can draw on the title of another eighteenth-century novel) of his very own.

The dominant metaphor in Read's writing is depth. Land is never just surface and the present is never just the (perpetual) present: no postmodernity here. Belonging is always an expression of one's attachment to history, colonial as well as precolonial, and the deeper that attachment, the better. Read's influences include John Mulvaney on Australian prehistory and

Tom Griffiths's work on Australian antiquarianism. This country is therefore made to seem as if it is, and has always been, extremely old: all the more reason to belong to it. Indeed, the virtuousness of Read's work lies precisely in the way that it utterly respects its elders—the poets he quotes from, the commentators he uses, the 'venerable' characters he meets, and so on. (No one is ever criticised here.) Read's first two books in this trilogy had been about how to live in this antiquarian continent, where one is supposed to be in constant communion with deep history as if Australia's past is never meant to be forgotten. But in his third book, what is excavated from the depths is now entirely spectral. For Read, Australia is 'inspired': you can hardly move without falling over a ghost. Of course, not everyone sees them, and Read takes a few moments to berate those of us (the 'secular', the sceptical) who aren't blessed with this particular gift. But there they are, and there is no convincing Read otherwise.

The notion that Australia is 'haunted' has its precursors, of course: think of the late colonial novelist Rosa Praed, or the spiritualist-feminists of the 1890s. Think also of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who lectured on spiritualism and ghosts while on tour in Australia in the early 1920s. The sense of a spectral Australia is carried on through a minor tradition of ghost stories here which Read seems unaware of, and in the occasional postcolonial renditions which suggest that contemporary Australia is haunted by its colonial misdeeds—and will remain so until reconciliation and an apology from a prime minister somehow manage to lay these things

to rest. Read gives us one version of this rendition since many of the ghosts his interviewees see are Aboriginal and always from the distant past. A true believer, Read never actually sees an apparition himself, even though he begins his book in a cemetery and is more concerned with excavating the buried past than anyone he talks to. Many of his interviewees, however, are better placed as mediums. The 'native born' are the privileged species ('Those of use who are born here ...'), able to 'feel' the deep connections to colonial and precolonial pasts as they watch Aboriginal apparitions walking across their property. We might think that seeing a ghost on one's property would be unsettling, a reminder of previous land ownership, perhaps. But in Read's book, these sightings paradoxically confirm the sense that the new owners *belong* to their properties. Seeing an Aboriginal ghost, for Read, legitimates post-colonial settler ownership; it is itself an act of reconciliation, which in this context always means reconciling settler Australians to property. (The ghost of a settler Australian might therefore be *more* disturbing, but no one seems to see any of these.)

Read is, relative to most Australian historians, an eccentric, following in the wake of Australian landscape and religious poets, the anthems of bush nationalism and the imaginings of 'white Aboriginality', and sitting alongside contemporary expressions of eco-spirituality and the Jungian and New Age prophetics of someone like David Tacey. But he has also placed himself at the heart of a national project: the justification of settler ownership of Australian land in

the context of the official policy (albeit more or less abandoned by the Howard government) of reconciliation. His nationalism makes him talk up the 'uniqueness' of the Australian settler experience. But his liberalism requires that he acknowledge other kinds of settlers, not just the 'native born'. So *Haunted Earth* locks itself into a second national project, multiculturalism. Its encounters with established white rural landowners are thus peppered with immigrant stories in a way that reminded me of Murray Bail's novel *Eucalyptus* (1998)—not least because in both cases, those immigrant stories are both obsessively related and repeatedly enclosed within a nationalist frame. The problem for Read is how can new immigrants also deeply belong to Australia? Since he now conceives of belonging in spiritual (or spiritualist) terms, his immigrant interviewees are usually non-secular: a Buddhist monk, a Malaysian Chinese Taoist, and so on. Read knows that these people cannot be 'indigenous' in the way he intends, so his strategy is to universalise their experience: they may not quite fit the nationalist paradigm, but they are nevertheless 'similar'. Two of his ANU colleagues, Jacqui Lo and Dipesh Chakrabarty, are identified in the same way, their exotic 'rituals' wisely understood by Read as part of the universal sameness of spiritual life. But other interviewees are more troubling. At a Spanish Benedictine monastery in Western Australia, Read seems exasperated: 'Some of the monks I speak to hold no idea of the connections between spirituality and the land ... It's not what I expected.' (184) Elsewhere, Read tries to 'harmonise' Buddhist and

Aboriginal lore, but again there are monks who seem to refuse to be assimilated. Muslim immigrants in Burra in South Australia are equally obstinate, recognising 'nothing sacred here'. (241) The refusal to assimilate, or even to be diasporic, irritates him.

These examples are fleeting, however: a reminder that authentic reconciliation, for Read, is still something to strive for if only these newer arrivals would allow themselves to be enlightened (and, we might say, overdetermined). His final interviewee, a Japanese man who is an anthropologist researching traditional Aboriginal forms of food production, allows Read to return to the spiritual realm where logic and reason 'seemed less important, even irrelevant' (253) as the new is smoothly reconciled with the old, the immigrant with the indigenous. *Haunted Earth* is a book with one idea, to which each different interviewee is relentlessly subordinated. In this respect, it is pure ego: indeed, its concept of deep belonging has something pre-Oedipal about it, as if the child-settler and the nurturing mother-landscape have never really been separated at all. In *Returning to Nothing*, the settler experience of dispossession only intensified one's sense of attachment, as I noted: one would always expect, inevitably, to return to one's property, to come home. At one point, as he walks around his cemetery looking for ghosts, Read stumbles across a man sleeping: '*For God's sake, what's that?* A pair of sneakers, a jacket and a long shape prone on a double grave ... Someone asleep! I think. Switch off the torch, retreat, quietly but fast, and take another direction!'

(33) This passage is nothing less than symptomatic: homelessness does indeed have no part to play in Read's Australia.

KEN GELDER is Reader in English at the University of Melbourne, Australia. His books include *Reading the Vampire* (1994) and *Uncanny Australia* (1998, with Jane M Jacobs). His new book, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, was published by Routledge at the end of 2004.
