

Passage Work

Book Review

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Martin Thomas

The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains

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On a cold winter afternoon in 1995, I was conducting research for my first novel in the Megalong Valley in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. As we drove on the valley's single road along the base of the escarpment, my interviewee mentioned that the caves and grottoes above us had been used for filming *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome's* 'Crack in the Earth' sequence. It was strange, she said, to see bearskin-clad 'feral children' skittering across the hairpin bends which wound back up to Blackheath. She then stopped to point out a dead gum tree not far from the road's edge. Glimpsed briefly, the pale tree trunk bears in my memory the traces of a yellowish or reddish stain: faint footholds are still visible, cut into its length. According to local legend, she told me, the tree had been cut by Aboriginal men in the early years of the valley's settlement, not long after the first white crossing of the mountains. From this lookout they had continuously observed

the woman who lived in the house below—to the point where she had finally retired, almost demented by their vigil, from the valley.

Unfortunately, focused on researching the Hydro Majestic hotel which loomed above us on the cliff-top, I did not think to write down this story, and I am afraid I may have applied some retrospective novelistic licence to its details. Yet true or not—as Martin Thomas' *Artificial Horizon* suggests—such legends and myths have the power to inscribe cultural logics and, perhaps more importantly, discomforts and yearnings that bring our present's negotiation with the past alive. This story, with its almost vertiginous exchange of gazes, is fascinating because it indicates—especially in a landscape reduced to the 'picturesque' from the Hydro Majestic's pink balustrated veranda high above—a settler community uncomfortably conscious of being watchee as much as watcher, of having lost control somehow of the 'imperial gaze'. In this story—so perfectly suggestive that I still wonder if it is not some retrospective postcolonial projection—the bush reveals itself not only as productive 'land' or 'landscape' but, in the union of men and tree, as 'country', a place with an already-inscribed consciousness and story. While clearly betraying an anxiety about the vulnerability of unprotected white women to the 'threat' represented by men of colour, its gender politics also reverse the traditional perception of the Mountains (of which Thomas writes) as feminine or passive in the doubtful 'Aboriginal' legend of the Three Sisters and in the popular Victorian photographic joke of posing three women at the Echo Point lookout. In the story I was told, the landscape is active, engaged, and possibly seeking engagement, while the settler's plot of land is instead depicted as female, vulnerable, and unable to answer the interrogation opened up. That George Miller should have used this site as part of a globalised, non-specific locale for the placement of his cinematic fantasy of white aboriginality after the *tabula rasa* of nuclear war brings a delicious layer of extra potential readings to this place.

Vagueness, complexity, interconnection and discombobulation: these qualities are typical of the stories which attach themselves to the Blue Mountains. For Australia's first settlers, the Mountains loomed large, not only as an obstacle to potential fertile grazing land beyond, but also in the imagination, due to what was perceived as their hazy, labyrinthine recalcitrance. This mythic freight only increased over the years, as stories which plumbed the deepest European fears and fantasies were reworked into the Mountains' uses as a honeymoon, tourist and wilderness resort. Meanwhile, much of the mountain's rich endowment as 'country' was fragmented or muddied, while what remained continues to be overlaid with generically codified myths of Aboriginal extinction, the gap left by these colonial fantasies of emptiness filled by 'Aboriginal' legends of highly dubious provenance.

Yet as Paul Carter (whose groundbreaking work on 'spatial history' clearly enriches Thomas's) notes, it is often the anticipated, the potential, even the mistaken, which reveal more about the past, and about the phenomenology of being in place, than the more fixed 'facts' of

historical achievement. In his introduction to *The Artificial Horizon* Thomas makes it clear that his purpose is not to write a local history of the Mountains (although his book is also exceptionally useful in this regard) but to negotiate a path through its shifting, often-evanescent narratives in order to find out what they reveal more generally about the ‘dreamwork of imperialism’ and the very process of making meaning out of place and past in this country.

Instead of organising his material into chapters, Thomas divides his book into five ‘passages’, bookended by an introduction and a coda. In addition to its musical and literary associations, the term ‘passage’ suggestively conjures the sandstone passages which wind through the Blue Mountains (and, according to local legend, beneath the entire town of Katoomba). Indeed, it is their dark twin, the labyrinth, with its winding passageways, that provides the guiding metaphor for this book. By opening with Nietzsche’s statement that ‘only ideas *won by walking* have any value’, and exploring literary references from Camus to Calasso on the Greek myth, Thomas continually reinforces the idea that his work will eschew the God’s eye view from the mountaintop for the ethics of encounter that informs performance-based readings of early colonial history such as Greg Dening’s and Inga Clendinnen’s, and that it will maintain the vivid complexity of such stories as what Meaghan Morris might refer to as ‘potential events’.

However, as if to challenge the authority of this first metaphor, another—of the artificial horizon—continually ‘crosses’ it. Before undertaking his expedition with William Lawson and William Wentworth to ‘discover’ the route across the Blue Mountains, Thomas writes, Gregory Blaxland sought to borrow an artificial horizon from an unwilling Governor Macquarie: this device was a surveyor’s tool which functioned by replacing the ‘real’ horizon with a falsely straight one made of mercury. Thomas is clearly fascinated by the conceit of this imperial, mechanical tool, at whose heart is a fiction—not only for the challenge it offers to the regulating eye of imperialism, but for its suggestiveness of the ‘always-mediated artifice of looking’, along with the sense it implies of the uncertain, mercurial nature of encounter. Other metaphors posed by Thomas for these same qualities include mirrors, hieroglyphs, and the strange vector-like helectites of the Jenolan Caves. While Thomas’s metaphors in the first sections of *The Artificial Horizon* can feel over-elaborated, the accumulated experience of reading is precisely the opposite, as the writing slips between narrative and metaphor. The early layering of metaphorical bedrock makes the subsequent opening out and interconnection of material an exhilarating experience—one which moves Thomas’s scholarly, highly original ‘mythography’ into literary territory.

In *The Artificial Horizon*’s first ‘Passage’, Thomas moves from considering recent problematic conceptualisations of the Mountains as ‘wilderness’ to the blindness of Blaxland, Lawson, and Wentworth in their iconic expedition to signs of Aboriginal presence and resistance. As he sifts carefully through the multiple implications of the ‘artificial horizon’, Thomas establishes his project as one of retexturing the flattened contours of the past. Passage Two offers a close reading

of Eugene von Guérard's sketches and 1862 painting of the Weatherboard (now Wentworth) Falls as the axis for a meditation on the ambiguous status of Aboriginal presence in early colonial painting. With a sympathy and fluidity equal to Greg Denning's, Thomas reads into these early works complex parables of moral ambivalence about Aboriginal agency and displacement. Passage Three moves Thomas's work more strongly into the area of mythography, examining some guiding metaphors of the imperial imaginary—such as Biblical oppositions between high and low, light and shade—in order to consider the early colonial administration's attempts to censor the imaginative faculty (especially those convict fantasies which imagined the land beyond the mountains as a space of freedom).

The Artificial Horizon begins to acquire its sense of meditative force around Passage Four, which ranges with great suppleness from considering ecstatic fantasies of Aboriginal invisibility (and attendant unease) in twentieth-century tourist discourses, to an intensely local exercise in cultural history, a re-examination of the 1957 displacement of Aboriginal residents in the area known as 'the gully' just below Thomas's own house, by the building of the now-defunct Catalina Racetrack. This brings us to the heart of his project—to continually scrutinise this landscape for signs of life, and insist on counterbalancing a mythically deeply-rooted national desire for Aboriginal effacement with a scrupulous insistence on their continued presence. The detailed reminiscences of Lynn Stanger, who spent her childhood in the gully, gently insist upon the visibility and inclusion of the gully community in the daily life of Katoomba in the 1950s—and give a shockingly recent instance of how narratives insisting on the already-accomplished 'disappearance' of Aboriginal people can authorise further acts of displacement. Thomas also records how Aboriginal Mountains residents (including the traditional owners, the Gundungurra) have recently reclaimed the gully as an 'Aboriginal place'.

It is worth noting here that in 1995, when I began my research, most local histories (with the exception of some interesting work by local historian Jim Smith who has attempted to retrace a 'songline') insisted that Aboriginal presence in the mountains had been minimal, at most limited to 'ceremonial' purposes. Nevertheless it is not difficult to find references in the turn-of-the-century *Blue Mountain Echo* to local Aboriginal residents (snide quips about the 'mission in North Katoomba'; the story of a 'dark' child's participation in a rescue at Narrow Neck; and that all-too-common feature piece of regional journalism of the era, an interview with the area's 'last Aborigine'). Historians' blindness to such material was no doubt exacerbated by a reluctance to regard anyone of mixed heritage as 'Aboriginal' and a strategic tendency among people of Aboriginal descent until very recently to hide the fact. For these reasons it is especially exciting to see Thomas put into wider circulation the powerful Gundungurra creation story of Mirragan and Gurangatch, originally transcribed around 1900 by amateur ethnologist RH Mathews, and published in a German anthropological journal. In contradistinction to Aboriginal 'legends' in the

settler canon which focus on death or disappearance, Thomas reads this story as a parable of positive compromise—the great chase between quoll and fish creates the valley of the Wollondilly, and ends as Mirragan eventually retires, satisfied by a piece of Gurangatch's flesh.

In Passage Five—which I read in manuscript when Thomas was in the early stages of his research—*The Artificial Horizon's* argument becomes vertiginous. Reconstructing through letters and court transcripts the 1957 suicide from Govetts Leap of the troubled anthropologist Vere Gordon Childe, Thomas borrows from phenomenology, psychology, mythology, and philosophical writings on suicide to read this death provocatively as a 'work of art', which gives voice to the often-censored acts of others who have, according to local perception, been drawn in more-than-usual numbers to the mountains as a place to end their lives. Thomas suggests that Childe's personal impasse (unable to find a place for himself in Australia, unable to incorporate Aborigines into his anthropological schemes), interiorised many of the conflicts embodied in the weird melancholy of the Mountains, as he faced the precipice's dizzying invitation both to overview and death. In this passage another debt becomes visible: Thomas's wide-ranging meditative structure, fascination with walking and suicide, and scrupulous lucidity seem to owe something to the remarkable essay-novels of WG Sebald (about whom Thomas writes elsewhere). That said, I cannot help wondering if Thomas does not also share something of Sebald's morbid Romanticism in exaggerating the dark side of the Mountains and the death wish they evoke.

In addition to being a work of cultural history, *The Artificial Horizon* is a memoir of Thomas's lifelong fascination with the Mountains. Thomas's scrupulous self-placement—whether describing an epic teenage walk to the Kanangra Walls or the researcher unfurling a von Guérard 'flat on a storage cabinet for me to view'—not only brings an engaging immediacy to his work, but also, for me at least, recalls the Mountains' long genealogy of passionate residents such as Harry Phillips who found themselves 'called' by something in the landscape. As Thomas continuously considers his own place as a white Australian and resident of the Mountains, *The Artificial Horizon* truly answers the demand within historical and cultural studies fields for ethical and engaged first-person work.

In his 'Coda', Thomas recalls a walk to Bull Cave. His map fails him but, as in so many mistaken journeys, error proves fertile: a Muslim couple he meets guide him to another pristine birthing cave unmarked on his map. When he eventually finds Bull Cave it is, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the bars at its entrance, irretrievably damaged by graffiti. Standing here, Thomas finds himself pondering the Aboriginal paintings' alternative fate: eventually fading behind bars without the traditional retouchings that kept them vivid, or discussed in scholarly writings as if the graffiti had never occurred. Instead, Thomas puts the case for reading Bull Cave's sexist and racist new markings *together with* the stories of the painters who drew them, no matter what uncomfortable turn of the labyrinth this may take us down. This, at least, is a story with a

future: if we cannot accept its many layerings of place, he suggests, we risk (at least spiritually) the self-denying fate of Vere Gordon Childe.

Over the last few years Echo Point at Katoomba has been refurbished with native plants, new sandstone and glass buildings, and plinths inscribed with quotes from seminal Blue Mountains texts directing the visitor's 'experience' to the Three Sisters. Across the valley, that kitschy monument to the 1950s, Scenic World, has installed a smooth a new Skyway and has removed the forecourt's tackily decaying statues of the three Aboriginal 'sisters' holding up their nubile concrete arms in the very moment of being turned into stone. As someone whose own work is inscribed on one those plinths, I have to admit a deep ambivalence to these renovations. I suspect it is their apparent 'seamlessness' that most bothers me: the aura of postcolonial consensus in an area whose uses and meanings are still highly contested; their banishment into invisibility of those moments of roughness, shock and intensity that were visible within the old organic hotchpotch. They direct the gaze up and out.

Through sensitive textual reconstruction and recovery of ethnographic material, close personal encounter with the landscape, and the reintroduction of a broad range of voices and texts, *The Artificial Horizon* challenges this seamlessness. This, along with Thomas's insistence on the Mountains' continued capacity to agitate the senses and the very sense of self, is no doubt why—as well as winning the 2004 Gleebooks Prize for literary and cultural criticism—his book has been received so warmly by residents of the Mountains. *The Artificial Horizon* makes a brilliant and original contribution to both cultural history and cultural studies by finding lines of flight from these disciplines to wider morphologies of myth. Its strategy of suggestive placement produces a quality of continuous surprise as Thomas finds signs of life everywhere, their poignancy and uncertainty left intact.

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Delia Falconer holds a PhD in English literature and cultural studies from the University of Melbourne. Her first novel *The Service of Clouds* explored the European stories that sit uneasily in the Blue Mountains landscape. Her second novel, *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*, was published by Picador in July 2005.