Paramount Place

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Peter Hay
MAIN CURRENTS IN WESTERN ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT
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P OET, SCHOLAR, TEACHER, writer and essayist are just a few terms that could be used to describe Peter Hay (or ‘Pete Hay’ as he presents himself on the second of these book covers). Hay, as Reader in Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Tasmania, is an internationally respected environmental thinker. His searching new book Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought offers an insightful assessment of the basis for the environmentalism familiarly found in Green politics.

Hay declares, early on in the book, that he has written ‘with an intelligent, non-specialist reader in mind’. Conscious of the dangers in ‘yesterday’s orthodoxy rapidly becoming today’s history’, Hay’s book is both timely and relevant. As the Greens continue to gain electoral support, Main Currents offers a much-needed scholarly perspective on the theoretical positions underpinning serious environmental discourse. As well as exploring the contemporary nature of the issues, Hay also traces the rise of environmental theory. He provides the infrastructure for the book’s main currents through two central questions: How has the new environmentalism interacted with its historical antecedents? What is the future of such terms as wilderness, place, sustainability and democracy?

Tasmania is broadly recognised as a source of inspiration in Green politics. It is also a place where the history of environmental politics is measured by spectacular disasters, such as Lake Pedder, and internationally significant successes, such as the preservation of the Franklin River. But, as Hay shows, at times Green politics have also been linked to areas such as feminism, spiritualism and other ‘isms’.

Structurally, the book is divided into longish chapters, which are essays in themselves. Readers unfamiliar with environmental theory should not be intimidated by such titles as ‘Romanticism: The First Broadcast Expression of an Ecological Impulse’ or ‘Reclaiming Place: Seeking an Authentic Ground for Being’. Such headings are the stuff of the academy and resonate with Hay’s observance of scholarly requirements. His prose is clean and uncluttered.

While accessible to lay readers, Main Currents is also replete with strong intellectual challenges. Hay expects us to have a theoretical grasp as to why we hold certain positions regarding the environment. He asks, ‘Is the environment movement of today simply recycled nineteenth-century romanticism?’ and invites us to ponder whether ‘much writing that elucidates the qualities of place seeks to reestablish the bonds of communal living that have been rendered tenuous under liberal capitalism’. These are not easy issues to resolve.

What distinguishes this book is Hay’s objectivity. He does not conceal the fact that he is an environmentalist with a passion for understanding the role that place has on the individual, yet he does not allow his enthusiasms to cloud his judgment. This is not a polemical book but one tempered by measured argument and rational deduction. Whether it is Hay’s analysis of ‘Marxist hostility to environmentalism’ or Heidegger as a political theorist, this is a book that rewards careful reading.

H AY’S VERSATILITY AND RANGE of passionate concerns are revealed in his personal essays. His collection Vandemonian Essays centralises place as a means to understand self and the main currents of contemporary living. While Hay is capable of writing coolly detached academic treatises, here he successfully makes the transition to populist essays. In the spirited introduction, Hay defines himself as a ‘dissident’. It is an interesting, if slightly surprising, admission when one remembers his championing of environmental theory in Main Currents. He notes: ‘I begin from the conviction, a conviction based in experience rather than theory, that there is almost always (not necessarily, but almost always) a superior perspective on contentious matters Tasmanian to the approved and sanctioned view.’

The personal essay form enables Hay to engage robustly with some of his convictions and to leave the ‘character-simplifying dogtag around my neck whether it is “academic” (to most people) or “poet” (to some few others)’. These Vandemonian Essays sing with a freedom not found in scholarly writing, allowing, as Hay puts it, an ‘escape from the prove-it dictates of argument’. What is paramount is the role place essay, then, is an essentially creative mind/place dialogue that is closer to literature — even poetry — than it is to the learned paper.

Many of the essays in this collection have been published elsewhere, often in modified form. The freshness of the prose and the immediacy of the concerns they raise have not dimmed. In one of the finest published reflections on the massacre at Port Arthur, simply titled, ‘Port Arthur: Where Meanings Collide’, Hay makes this biting comment: ‘[A] large proportion of Tasmania’s resident intellectual community — particularly the professional intellectuals employed at the University of Tasmania — are not Tasmanians, and remain overwhelmingly preoccupied with the world beyond Bass Strait. Even more importantly, there is the formidable difficulty of making sense of Port Arthur’s most recent chapter of horror within the context of an identity that itself remains juvenile.’ At times, it feels as if Hay is debating with himself. Some
of the essays suggest that he is working out the bearings for his own life in Tasmania whilst simultaneously providing grid references for us to ponder issues of regionalism. His piece ‘That Islanders Speak, and Others Hear’ invites us to think differently about islands and, pertinently, Tasmania. Hay writes: ‘The very boundedness of islands makes them different. Physical boundedness conduces to psychological distinctiveness, because it promotes clearer, “bounded” identities.’

Aside from Hay’s use of the essay to raise key issues, he is also a writer who is capable of deft moves in the essay form. This is evident in the playful ‘Remembering Mrs Mole’s Christmas Puddin’’. Here Hay mourns the loss of a coveted recipe for a rich Christmas pudding due to the passing of time and indifference. But the essay is beguiling. Hay’s chief concern is to celebrate the women of the north-west of Tasmania, the pudding makers.

Whether it is Hay in dialogue with us about environmental theory or sluicing experience in open-ended essays, what stands out in these two books is his commitment to clear communication.