

**Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010)**

Here we have a rare event, the reprint of a classic work in Australian cultural history. *The Road to Botany Bay* was first published twenty-five years ago by Faber and Faber, with the subtitle, 'An essay in spatial history', and by the University of Chicago Press with the subtitle, 'An Exploration of Landscape and History'. The present University of Minnesota Press edition is a facsimile of the original as it was published in the United States. Its subtitle de-emphasises the claim to innovation and challenge to conventional historiography carried by 'spatial history', and evokes more familiar concepts.

Yet there is no denying the innovative importance of this book's detailed and engaging demonstration that place names signify histories – that they do not make hitherto meaningless places meaningful, as commonsense would suggest, but rather construct historical landscapes. Or to put it another way, the country was not simply already there, waiting to be discovered, but the act of journeying in and around it, mapping it, naming it, is what renders it meaningful. Landscape is, therefore, 'not a physical object: it is an object of desire, a figure of speech outlining the writer's exploratory impulse' (81). The originality of Carter's argument was especially timely, arriving as it did on the Australian intellectual scene in 1987, as a prelude to the celebration of the bicentenary of white settlement. He made a major contribution to the 'de-colonising' of thought which accompanied the bicentenary, even if he did not convince all his readers that 'spatial history' was an entirely new way of writing history.

Environmental and landscape historians Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffith attribute to *The Road to Botany Bay* the enlivening of place name history, which had hitherto seemed something parochially local, or else a backwater of linguistics or historical geography. As they wrote in their Introduction to *Words for Country: Landscape and Language in Australia* (2002), Carter 'turned the study of nomenclature into a new area of literary criticism, cultural studies and psychological, political and historical analysis'.

While historians of various stripes, as well as geographers, postcolonial theorists and Indigenous historians frequently cite this book, Carter's early work has had a major impact on literary and cultural criticism as well. For Carter's thesis concerns the powers of language: the materials of his analysis are principally the journals kept by early explorers, and he reads the journal as 'a biography of a journey' (75), the writer's metaphors as 'a mode of knowing' (95).

Cook, Flinders and Mitchell are the explorers whose journals yield the most sustained analysis in this book. Others quoted include Sturt, Eyre, Giles and Stokes, and of course Watkin Tench, the great observer of the first Botany Bay expedition. Carter also considers some settler journals, and later statements by town planners and images presented by poets and painters. He is adept at identifying their attitudes and desires and placing them in the context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century thought, which he characterises as marked by resistances to the claims of Enlightenment scientific rationalism. The eleven chapters, whether they draw on one writer or many, are organised around such themes as naming and possessing, or

Book reviews: *The Road to Botany Bay* by Paul Carter. Susan Sheridan.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

metaphorical associations such as journals and journeys. Later chapters on convicts and Aborigines reflect the belief, still-prevalent in the 1980s, that either group could only be understood from a distance, through the eyes of educated white record-keepers.

Despite this, *The Road to Botany Bay* undoubtedly stands the test of time – it is for the most part an engaging and illuminating read, and Carter’s approach is still fresh. A certain insistence on the originality of his endeavour, and its justification in terms of post-structuralist theory, reminds this reader of how much the discourse of cultural history has changed in the past 25 years, and suggests how influential Carter’s book was in that change. Carter’s debt to structuralism is signalled by his rhetorical habit of using oppositions – of the ‘not this but that’ variety – to define his point. For instance, ‘Cook’s place names were tools of travelling rather than fruits of travel’ (32) is just one instance of a recurrent opposition between the process and open-endedness of ‘spatial history’ and the solidity and stasis of cause-and-effect linear history. Cook the explorer is opposed and preferred to Banks, the Enlightenment observer-scientist. Carter writes: ‘the new country was a rhetorical construction, a product of language and the intentional gaze, not of the detached, dictionary-clasping spectator’ (36). Similarly Flinders’ *Voyage* is praised as ‘the first great work of Australian spatial history’ (179) rather than an exercise in its opposite, ‘imperial history’. Although Carter is careful not to pin down the qualities involved in an exploratory kind of resistance to Enlightenment certainties, it seems to me that Romanticism would be the historically appropriate label for those qualities.

**Susan Sheridan**