

Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (Hamish Hamilton, 2015)

Tim Winton spent his childhood in suburbia and on Australia's west coast as described in his autobiography *Land's Edge* (1993). He wrote his way to become the darling of Australian readers who enjoy his rich prose that evokes the south-western landscape of his native land. He can be regarded as a writer who has a close affinity with the people and especially the land that he holds in high regard in his stories. Winton's coastal narratives invariably vividly depict rural communities functioning in harmony with the beach culture.

Like many other major Aussie writers-cum-ecological pioneers – Oodegeroo Noonuccal, Judith Wright (who is quoted in the book's epigraphs), Xavier Herbert and Patrick White – and contemporary activists such as Richard Flanagan, Tim Winton does not hesitate to write about sensitive environment-related subjects, such as marine conservation in his novel *Shallows* (1984).

Island Home: A Landscape Memoir, whose title is a blatant homage to Neil Murray's popular song on Australia that was originally performed by the Indigenous Warumpi Band, partakes of this preservation culture by being more than just a provocative memoir on the ravages of time impacting on the environment.

The notion that there is some kind of geographical determinism testifying to the influence of geography on people is not new and was mainly propounded by Christopher Koch. To him, geography is a great shaper which has allowed those Australians who were the sons and daughters of cool-climate people to re-invent themselves as warm-climate people:

We have begun to be a new, culturally distinct people. Of course, we are a European people essentially and, of course, the consciousness that comes to us from Europe is still here. But I think we've reached the point where living in a different landscape, a different hemisphere, has produced a different consciousness.¹

Tim Winton, though, is not concerned with international politics, nor with the Asian-Pacific region. His focus is more domestic, if not personal, fathoming the cultural, genetic and psychological impact of the Australian land:

I'm increasingly mindful of the degree to which geography, distance and weather have moulded my sensory palate, my imagination and expectations. The island continent has not been mere background. Landscape has exerted a kind of force upon me that is every bit as geographically as family. Like many Australians, I feel this tectonic grind – call it a familial ache – most keenly when abroad. (10)

In a string of essays subdivided into ten sections and spanning over 30 years of reflections arranged more thematically than chronologically, Tim Winton makes an uncompromising plea for a more sustainable world whose conscientious long-term planning and ecobuilding strategies would curb the severe damage caused by not-so-well-planned urbanisation:

¹ Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'An Interview with Chris Koch', *Commonwealth* 10.2 (Spring 1988) 70.

Like most kids I didn't imagine places had pasts. Even when I saw landforms and habitats gradually scraped away I didn't register the change for what it was. I didn't understand how permanent the forfeits would be. Humans break in order to build. And of course loss is an inevitable part of making, creating and surviving. But in exchange for what we surrender we surely have a right to expect something worthwhile, something good – developments that are mindful of their footprint, buildings that are sensitive to landscape, planning that considers the underlying cost and values change that's sustainable. Business leaders love to rhapsodize about 'a culture of excellence' but if our citizens are any indication of the fruits of their labours, they seem content to bulldoze beauty and replace it with crap. (48)

Like most life-writing subsets (i.e. biography and autobiography), this memoir will effortlessly convince readers of its ecological cause through the intimacy it creates with its readership and emotional fusion, using what Susan Keen has labelled 'ambassadorial strategic empathy [which] addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end.'² No doubt that the sense of sharing the author's innermost feelings in all sincerity will vouchsafe for readers' emotional involvement and increase their responsiveness, thus contributing to effect social change.

Evidence shows that books have a definite impact on people. Some books like Voltaire's *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763) and Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964) take on a consolation value, hence accounting for the fact that they have quickly made the bestseller list in France after the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo and on the Bataclan. Other books become symbols of resistance, which was the case of Lafayette's *The Princess de Clèves* (1678) after President Sarkozy disparagingly commented on the irrelevance of this French psychological novel for civil service entrance exams. It is to be hoped that Winton's *Island Home* will create a stir and raise greater awareness of the wrong directions Australian society could well take by disregarding the more sustainable options.

Jean-François Vernay

² Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative* 14:3 (October 2006) 224.