
REVIEWS

Geoffrey Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians Make Their Environment 1788-1980*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1981. Pp. 197. Illustrations. \$25.00.

Australia is well known internationally for its distinctive climate and landscape. The bush and bushmen, the dryness of the continent's center and the isolation of the outback are to many people familiar images of Australia. Indeed, to browse around any major bookstore in Australia today confirms the existence of this image; the thick, glossy picture-laden "coffee-table" books exulting Australian wildlife and landscape are seen in increasing numbers.

In the face of this picture of a people deeply appreciative and aware of their environment, Professor Geoffrey Bolton's *Spoils and Spoilers: Australians Make Their Environment 1788-1980* presents a sobering view of Australia's actual environmental record. Being deliberately polemical, Bolton sets out to describe the history of neglect of the Australian environment. In doing so, he shows not only the tragic effects of European settlement on the ecology since 1788, but probes deeper to reveal the linkage between environmental exploitation and the ingrained values of Australians toward the pursuit of economic security and the role and power of government.

Bolton begins *Spoils and Spoilers* by analyzing Aboriginal environmental practices prior to the coming of white settlers. The author maintains that the Aborigines' subtle environmental practices were unappreciated by the Europeans; for the Aborigines "the individual was subordinated to the good of the community, and the community was subordinated to the environment." By contrast, the Europeans came to Australia with firm notions about the relationship between themselves and their physical surroundings. Influenced by Biblical ideas and centuries of English feudalism, they believed they were distinct from and superior to the environment, and said that "the essential mark of an individual was ownership of property."

Bolton then sets about demonstrating that in the last two hundred years little heed has been paid to protecting and preserving the Australian environment. The white man's search for survival in the harsh conditions, settler resistance to government interference, the spirit of frontier individ-

ualism, and the pursuit of profit have been among the chief factors inhibiting environmental management in Australia. Bolton cites numerous cases of this negligence. For example, massive deforestation occurred in the nineteenth century as pastoralists sought grazing lands and miners found the need for firewood to fuel their steam engines and crushing machines. Animals, too, fell prey to the European desire to tame the land in the name of prosperity. Whales and seals, which were once plentiful off the Australian coast, were virtually extinct by the 1860s.

In urban planning, the importation of British ideas also related poorly to local conditions. In a country of great space it was paradoxical that Australian cities of the last century were cluttered with terrace-style houses which were popular in countries of high population and limited land such as England.

Bolton argues that the disregard for the national estate has continued unabated even in the post-war era. Although a few planners in the last thirty-five years have seen the need for better conservation, the unprecedented growth of populations, industry and urbanization has meant that decisions about town and country planning have been invariably piecemeal and based on crisis management.

The cutting edge of *Spoils and Spoilers* is Bolton's continual questioning of the Australian character itself, and the many assumptions Australians make about their way of life. He sharply elucidates the curious love/hate relationship that exists between Australians and their physical world; that is, the idealization and popularization of the "bush" and "outback" traditions on one hand, and the desire to conquer, exploit, tame and destroy their natural surroundings on the other. The author hints that the environmental dilemma is a symptom of a deeper Australian malady; Bolton suggests that Australians turn a blind eye to their environment because of their preoccupation with creating a secure and unassailable world upon their quarter-acre block. To Bolton, what divides Australians is the "ruling passion of ownership of a house detached from its neighbor."

Nor is the future for Australia's environment bright. In spite of the popular image to the contrary, Bolton argues that only in times of economic prosperity, such as in the 1880s and 1960s, were calls for conservation loudly heard. The economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s leads Bolton to conclude that even if ecological concern continues, its influence on the "spoilors"--the large mining and forestry companies, the multinational corporations and the so-called urban "developers"--will undoubtedly dissipate.

Although *Spoils and Spoilers* keenly examines a wide range of environmental issues, it is marred by a number of methodological and interpretive oversights. Curiously, Bolton does not state his aims at the outset as though he feels his readers share his many assumptions about the righteousness of the environmental cause. Also, while the book underlines the need for awareness by Australians on environmental issues, it is disappointing that *Spoils and Spoilers* ends on a pessimistic note and makes no recommendations or calls for future action.

Bolton occasionally oversimplifies to sharpen the points of his argument. To state, for instance, that the great drought of the 1890s was instrumental in the formation of the Australian Labor Party is to neglect the important role of urban trade unions dating from the 1860s. Also, to argue that "one of the marks of a colonial society is its inability to recognize its own social problems, or to set about finding remedies for them without waiting for a lead from some higher authority overseas," seems to ignore, *inter alia*, the lessons of the Asian and African nationalist struggles of the twentieth century.

In spite of these few shortcomings, *Spoils and Spoilers* does present concerned readers with an informative and disturbing survey of the neglect for Australia's environment. While the book does not espouse action, it will undoubtedly prove to be a valuable resource document in the battle against both the popular myth of "unspoilt Australia" and the reality of short-sighted economic exploitation.

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