The poem beneath our feet

Kevin Brophy

THE BLUE PLATEAU:
A LANDSCAPE MEMOIR
by Mark Tredinnick
University of Queensland Press
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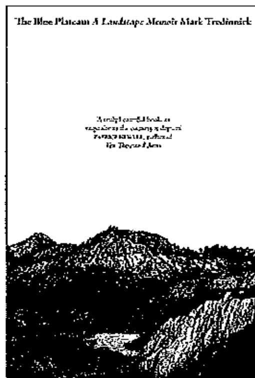

The Blue Plateau, set in the Blue Mountains, is part memoir, part essay and part anecdotal local history. Mark Tredinnick wrote it during the seven years he spent living in the valley below Katoomba with his wife and growing family. Strangely, we learn little of the author or his family as this informative, sympathetic and poetic book emerges from its landscape in meditative bursts. It is a kind of mosaic of prose poems. If there is an order in this book, it is, as Tredinnick suggests in his prologue, one that is more implicit than explicit.

The main preoccupations of *The Blue Plateau* are the geological history of this dramatic landscape, the experiences of some of its early pioneer settlers and their descendants, damage and accommodations made between white settlers and environment, the land management techniques of its indigenous occupants, and the tragedies of lives lost in natural disasters. Mostly, though, the book explores the patterns in these preoccupations. For Tredinnick, this crumbling landscape speaks emphatically of who we are and how we live.

> I am made of pieces and of the spaces between them where other pieces used to be. I am a landscape of loss. Most of me is the memory of where else, and who else, and with whom, I have been and no longer am.
>
> And so it is with the plateau; she, too, is a landscape of loss.
>
> We are not, none of us, not I and not this place – ever whole; we are never of a piece. Who we are is how what's left of us falls back toward some kind of coherence much older than we are.

This melding of self and earth is a romantic notion, we might think, being sophisticated enough to recognise a pathetic fallacy, and wise enough as the growing tsunami of climate change overwhelms us to know that we have been the enemies, not the companions, of our landscapes. The romance of nature that Tredinnick offers us is not a naïve romanticism, and is never untroubled. The beauty of this book, and an intriguing aspect of its always gripping prose, is the complexity of its late romanticism. Tredinnick works hard to establish his characters' closeness to the landscape and the landscape's attention to its inhabitants. He manages this without disguising the environmental damage that has been done.

This awareness of destruction, however, never leads to the indulgences of easy political rhetoric or standard moral condemnations. Tredinnick has constructed a position beyond the politics of condemning environmental exploitation by taking the longer geological view of this part of the world. Whatever is done now will only represent minor actions in an incomprehensibly larger narrative of the movement of rock, clay, sand, minerals and water across the planet. Tredinnick writes superbly about the drama of geological ages. He is a Richard Attenborough of geology.

The characters in *The Blue Plateau*, living in these valleys, become aware of a potentially redemptive connection between land and psyche. One of these is Henryk Topolnicki, a refugee from communist Poland. Tredinnick's brief sketch of him demonstrates the skills of a novelist: 'Henryk never learned the English for "slow". In Poland one had no prospect of ever owning a car, he told me, and there were none worth owning even if you did, so you never learned to drive. Here, Henryk took to driving as though it were the very enactment of freedom – a thing best taken at speed.' Henryk confesses to Tredinnick, 'I know I'm s'posed to think the country doesn't need me, but it's telling me it does. I can feel it leaning my way. It's asking me to heed it, to remember it, to make something of it. Love is what it wants. Or something.'

Tredinnick reflects on this: 'I think I've heard the trees say something similar. What the country wants is for us to let it in – into who we are and what we're doing and what we know of eternity. It needs us, and it wants to tell us something. That's why it's leaning our way. It wants us to listen; it wants us to know who it is, which is not what we've thought of it at all.'

There are no specific answers to how we might live with the land beyond this call to listen, to look, to be receptive. Perhaps this could be dismissed as a poet's answer to real and practical problems, but the poet's response is one that has been too often brushed aside for the sake of expedient approaches to the land. In one of his many aphoristic moments in *The Blue Plateau*, Tredinnick says, 'maybe you have to surrender something to find your way home'.

Treddinick writes with a modest, rough-hewn beauty. His strong, physical verbs remind us of one of our other great landscape writers, Gerald Murnane: 'I have just finished reading a piece of fiction about a man who insists on finding out how deep the bedrock is wherever he happens to be standing' (from Murnane's 'Stone Quarry' in *Velvet Waters*, 1990). Tredinnick begins his 'Lithology' section: 'Sooner or later I want the rocks in my head. I need to know the story of the ground I stand on, the lithology of home. I've always been this way. And how could I not have been so in the plateau, a landscape profound with geology? Geology divines the past life of a piece of ground.

'There is another world, wrote the poet Éluard; it is within this one.' Both writers, committed observers, use those suggestive words of physical presence – rock, piece, stand. Tredinnick brings to these words the playfulness of a cliché turned to a strangely literal meaning, a poet's comment put to a use he could not have imagined, with the spirit of an adventurer brought to the technical discipline of geology (a discipline he calls 'the poem beneath the poem beneath our feet').

The human story at the centre of this rocky book is that of Les Maxwell. Les was the grandson of an early settler who acquired many hundreds of hectares of land by occupying it, once leaving his teenage son behind for months to preserve his claim. Les lived a rough, resourceful life, gouging roads out of the valley on his bulldozer. He and his wife, May, lived simply: rabbits and sweet sherry. She kept a diary for more than twenty years, one notable for its asceticism. As with the landscape, all the detail in this diary crumbled away. In a book heavy with the experiences of men riding horses or camping out, May's diaries and recurring presence counter this man's world and expose its shortcomings. *The Blue Plateau* becomes much more than a local history as it charts anecdotally the unsteady trajectory of the lives of Les and May in this deeply compromised landscape. It is an exotic piece of writing, in thrall to the poem beneath our feet. ■

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First among equals

Peter Pierce

CHARLES KINGSFORD SMITH AND THOSE MAGNIFICENT MEN
by Peter FitzSimons
HarperCollins
$49.99 hb, 679 pp, 9780732284879

In the epilogue to the latest, massive contribution to his populist and nationalist enterprise, *Charles Kingsford Smith and Those Magnificent Men*, Peter FitzSimons laments that 'the true glory days of the pilot are substantially gone'. He charts an heroic, pioneering age of aviation. The 'magnificent men [in their flying machines]' include not only the Australians, Kingsford Smith and his partner Charles Ulm, but the German Manfred von Richtofen, the Dutchman Anthony Fokker, the Frenchmen Louis Blériot and Charles Nungesser. Most of them saw service in the first aerial combats, above the trenches of the Western Front in the Great War. Kingsford Smith, a dismounted motorbike despatch rider at Gallipoli, was accepted into the Royal Flying Corps. He called this 'the chance of my flying life, and it was a decision I made without a moment's hesitation'.

For FitzSimons, the chance to write another biography of a fabled Australian – following, among others, Steve Waugh and Les Darcy, besides their legendary countrymen en masse at Tobruk and Kokoda – came in March 2007. He was asked 'to have a cup of coffee with a couple of blokes who wanted to make a documentary about Charles Kingsford Smith'. With a speed that his subject would have admired, the job was done in two years. Here was the story both of an 'iconic figure' and the 'wonderful sagas' in which he and fellow pilots featured. FitzSimons's laudable aim was 'to have Kingsford Smith and his companions *fly* again'. He drew on many secondary sources to produce 'end-noted fact', but also on 'judicious use of the poetic licence I keep in my wallet'. If, sadly, that is not the end of the ordinary jokes in a long book, FitzSimons had a rich field in which to work, replete with reckless endeavour, improbable survivals and, more often, disasters.

He quotes Kingsford Smith's resonant declaration that 'I came into the world of flying at its dawn, and what a glorious dawn'. This was the era of experiment in aircraft design, the instantly vicious use of aerial warfare, exploration of how far and where rudimentary planes could fly, and of the purposes for which such feats could be exploited. One constant narrative line in the book is the adaptation of adventure to commerce, beginning with the use of pilots' skills to develop aerial networks to deliver mail and passengers, first in modest numbers and over short distances, ultimately across oceans and around the world. Kingsford Smith, as FitzSimons convinces us by vivid and technically detailed episodes, was a great pilot. His ability to endure danger and discomfort, foul weather and mechanical breakdown was legendary. Thus another Australian larrikin was eventually promoted to wing commander and a postage stamp, knighted, and had Sydney airport named after him.

Kingsford Smith's father was a bank manager who went broke after guaranteeing a dud loan. The family moved to Canada before settling in Sydney, where Kingsford Smith had been born in 1897. As did many thousands, Kingsford Smith talked his parents into letting him join the First AIF. In the RFC, he received a British commission and the