

Patriots: Defending Australia's Natural Heritage 1946-2004 by William John Lines. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006, pp.416, AUD \$34.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780702235547.



In *Patriots: Defending Australia's Natural Heritage*, William Lines charts the development of the conservation movement in Australia through chronicling the struggles to preserve what are now Australia's most treasured natural sites: from the fight for Lake Pedder and the Great Barrier Reef, to the Franklin River, Fraser Island, and numerous other places of natural beauty. In the process, he tracks the emergence of the Australian Conservation Foundation and various other organisations and demonstrates the importance of popular activism and civil society in keeping government and corporate interests accountable.

It is, however, rather difficult to distil this fascinating story from what Lines himself describes as his 'idiosyncratic point of view'. He characterises the conservation experience as a struggle between 'patriots' and 'exploiters' – developers and politicians driven by a 'relentless, fundamentalist frenzy' to conquer and reform the natural world. Politicians, Lines believes, are 'cowards, temporisers, and opportunists, some are liars ... many are bullies, few – very few – are patriots'. But neither are all conservationists patriots, for many of them are prey to what Lines considers the greatest scourge of all – humanism. Bob Brown in particular he lambastes for advocating homocentric policies like multiculturalism and indigenous rights in tandem with the protection of nature. 'Conservation', he writes, 'and social justice are frequently incompatible'. Rife among 'self-obsessed humanist academics isolated in concrete academies' for whom, in the great tradition of Australian anti-intellectualism, he has nothing short of disdain, humanism 'abstracts' the visceral reality of the natural world. Lines' patriots turn out to be the ordinary Australians who, motivated by a deeply felt and directly experienced love for the bush, take on the destructive forces of big business and government and fight – often physically – to defend their 'birthright'. And herein lies Lines' core objection to Aboriginal land rights. Not only does he believe all humans to be destructive, he feels that acknowledging Aborigines' special relationship with the land excludes non-Aborigines from connection with it, condemning them 'forever to be outsiders, interlopers, or usurpers'. Amidst its lurching narrative, *Patriots* is littered with such pronouncements in what can only be described as aggressive prose.

The conservation movement in Australia was and still is driven by a variety of people with complex identities acting for diverse reasons in a plethora of ways. Many academics and scientists were prominent activists. Politicians helped the conservation cause as much as they hindered it, and whilst some farmers advocated development, others were motivated by love of the land to protect it. Aboriginal groups did not unanimously oppose development, and foresters did not undividedly support it. Lines seems unaware that the tactic of direct action he champions relies on the humanism he abhors: blockading would be entirely unsuccessful if bulldozer drivers did not respect the sanctity of human life. Similarly, Lines' assertion that conservation is 'parochial, geographic and territorial' not only ignores global warming but also contradicts his awareness of the vital role international recognition, in the form of World Heritage listing, played in national conservation. *Patriots*, moreover, contains some glaring omissions: the world before 1938, for one, and the long story of Europeans' encounter with the uniqueness of the Australian environment. We also hear nothing of several

World Heritage sites, or of the formation of the Land Conservation Council in Victoria. South Australia is never mentioned.

The central tenet of Lines' book is fascinating and the history of the connection between national identity and the Australian landscape merits closer study. In the context of eleven years of conservative government, a long drought, and global agitation concerning climate change, an exploration of the conservation movement and the ways in which the ideas of development and progress have been extended and contested in Australia is particularly important. *Patriots* makes a suggestive start on this important task.

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