The artificial horizon: imagining the Blue Mountains

Citation metadata

Author: Kevin Jones
Date: Spring 2004
From: Australian Aboriginal Studies(Vol. 2004, Issue 1)
Publisher: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
Document Type: Book review
Length: 1,355 words

Main content

Article Preview:

The artificial horizon: imagining the Blue Mountains

Martin Thomas


Martin Thomas' cultural study of the Blue Mountains is developed using a familiar technique of juxtaposition and antithesis, derived ultimately from Saussure and Levi-Strauss. It is focused on four main topics in the history and folklore of the area: European exploration narratives and paintings; Aboriginal myths which have accrued or been invented for the place; the fascinations of its topography and cliffs and the tourism paraphernalia that surround them; and a highly discursive account of the early life and, in 1957, the death of V Gordon Childe, in his generation the pre-eminent archaeologist of Europe and the Middle East. An overarching theme is that of the mountains as the labyrinth--"the most pervasive colonial metaphor for the topography [of the Blue Mountains]"--threatening loss and death. The settlements perched on the narrow ridgelines express 'the unsettled quality of settler life' (p.81). Along the way there are some useful polemics against the environmentalist gospel of the Maxvision film The edge; against the notion of wilderness; against the small and now dispersed museum of capricious and grotesque ethnology put together in a small-time private museum (by a man named Mel Ward); or against the destruction of the small, 'wrong side of the tracks', predominantly Aboriginal community of Catalina, for the sake of development of a race track. (Just to give a sense of the flavour of the writing, the last is titled 'Homage to Catalina', with its implied reference to Orwell, and to lost causes.)

The title comes from what Thomas regards as 'an acknowledged falsehood--a horizontal line' (p.21). This is the nineteenth-century surveyor's artificial horizon, an instrument incorporating a disc of mercury which, when stationary, would assume the horizontal and, by virtue of its reflecting surface, allow the determination of angular measurements above the horizon. It was used by colonial surveyors to determine altitude and latitude. This leads Thomas into a false antithesis between myth and science, between the nature of Aboriginal...
As Sydney established itself, the Blue Mountains formed a barrier to the westward expansion of the new colony. Local Gundungurra, Dharawal, Wiradjuri, Wanaruah, Darug and Darkinjung peoples used two main routes to cross the Blue Mountains, but most Europeans saw the range as a forbidding maze of sandstone bluffs, deep gorges and dense bush. At first, the colonists were too busy surviving to consider trying to cross. William Charles Wentworth, Australian Dictionary of Biography. Martin Thomas, The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2003. Updated: 17 June 2020. Return to Top.