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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epubs.scu.edu.au/jesp/vol5/iss2/9
Book Review: Land of Discontent: The Dynamics of Change in Rural and Regional Australia. By Pritchard, B. & McManus, P.

UNSW Press, Sydney. ISBN 0 86840 578 7 (soft cover)

*Land of Discontent* is an edited collection of essays written largely by social scientists from regional universities, although the editors and some contributors are from the University of Sydney. All the authors claim some affinity with the land of which they write. The approach is multidisciplinary and, thematically, the essays lean towards the public policy and the politics of change; themes that embrace the causes and consequences of change. None of the authors claim to be economists, so, on first appearances contributions from an economic perspective are relatively neglected. Notwithstanding, the editors and some other contributors are geographers who know that people and places matter, which is a good beginning for any rural analysis.

One should not judge a book by its cover; but *Land of Discontent* invites such judging. The editors make a point of talking about it in their preface. The feature piece of the cover reproduces a painting, ‘*The Car*’ by John Brack (1955). The editors claim that the imagery of *The Car* resonates through the book. What do I see in this image? *The Car* depicts a family of four taking a drive in the countryside, parents in the front seat, children are in the back; neatly nuclear and rather apt for the time it was painted. Glimpses of countryside through the windows of the car reveal a scatter of eucalypts across nearly denuded hills. Father in the drivers seat intent on direction, while mother looks out with sweet condescension. The children look shocked bemused repelled by what they see, nothing more than the countryside, or perhaps a country cousin. Upon reflection, I think the editors chose well.

*Land of Discontent* documents the economic, social and demographic decline of Rural and Regional Australia. I use the word ‘decline’ rather than Pritchard and McManus’ preference for ‘change’. There is little in the book to suggest other than unidirectional change and so pessimism is difficult to avoid. There are both big picture regional studies and more detailed studies in particular sectors and for particular issues. The response of the people to this decline is also documented, their grit, their struggle and their frustration’s. Such dour response to decline is what we are given for optimism. What the *Land of Discontent* does not explore in any great detail is the deep conservatism of the bush. I suspect that the conservatism of Rural and Regional Australia is a difficult subject for left leaning academics and moreso when the winds of change are hot and dry.

This is critical omission when it seems that at least one of the avowed progenitors of the book was the bushfire known as the Pauline Hanson phenomenon. *Land of Discontent* is not so much about this fire; rather it is about what provided her fuel. Lately, there seems to be heard around the city a sigh of political relief that this particular fire has burned back on itself and is as good as out. A message of *Land of Discontent* is that we should not be complacent because discontent smoulders and cannot be quenched with platitudes.

In this style of book the editors are challenged by the need for balance and comprehensiveness. They do not always succeed. For example, there is one chapter on the closure of bank branches, which is well crafted and readable. But we should
not read too much importance into the closure of banks. Arguably, the closure of hotels is more important and far less rational because it is often done just to obtain the license. However, there is only one chapter devoted to environmental and indigenous issues. This seems to be too little given the potential for such issues to cause conflict and disharmony, and one should say discontent. Indeed, the little coverage of indigenous issues warrants further comment. The aboriginal people of Australia could well be in the winter of their discontent. Could land rights be their ‘son of York’, well perhaps. Nevertheless, the erstwhile support for Pauline Hanson still speaks our unspoken shame. Where are the indigenous academics to speak for their people? Where are the words of the elders in this Land of Discontent? The silence is deafening.

Let me change course to a more semantic kind of collision. They way that people write, paradoxically, both bemuses and informs. Academics, too often, have an appalling way with jargon, and teflon-coated sociologists seem to be always to the fore. And yet the occasional gem sticks because, once it is caught in your shoe it is continually discomforting until its meaning is fully prised. One might reflect, for example, why use a word such as landscape (such as used by Lockie, at p. 26) when ‘the land’ or even the Englishness and tiveness of ‘countryside’ would serve as well? Oddly, as far as I can tell, the reason is both sensible and ideological, which seems a contradiction in terms. Land, is taken to be a resource, and far more economic in context. We work the land, we exploit the land and what we create is the landscape. Landscape, it seems is both what we see and what we feel about what we see. Landscape connotes images that are of a wider sense of ownership and a wider range of purpose. Idealistically, land represents the past, whereas landscape represents the future. So, we might conclude that the title of the book is Land of Discontent not, for example, Landscape of the Discontented, which would be a contradiction in terms.

I think that the authors have missed an opportunity to make a statement over the insignificance of celebrating the centenary of Federation. State boundaries matter because they are there, still, enduring impediments to progress. They represent the political divisions of a corrupt colonial past. Land of Discontent transcends these boundaries by pointing to the new socio-economic divisions that the Great Dividing Range truly is. The term ‘Rural and Regional’ does not quite capture this division if what is meant is ‘inland’. A suggestion would be that the Land of content must be coastal Australia.

The distinction is more than semantic. One clear message of the Land of Discontent is that Australia is not one homogeneous economy. When macroeconomists measure the indicators of our ‘average’ national economy, coastal boom is diluted by inland decline. So, when the Reserve bank increases interest rates as a counter-cyclical measure, coastal Australia suffers a less than deserved blow, but the inland is dealt with cruelly. So we see, the land of discontent feeds the gluttony of the coast and pays the bill doubly.

Worthy of a read is Land of Discontent, it may take you places that you have never been before, as does a trip in the countryside (but you have to stop and look).

By Allan Tunstall