

The Perfect Pyre

Gardens of Fire: An Investigative Memoir

By Robert Kenny

University of Western Australia Press, 260pp, AUD \$29.99, 2013

ISBN 9781742585109

Reviewed by Kim de Rijke

‘BLACK SATURDAY’ IS THE TERM NOW USED FOR THAT CATASTROPHIC DAY ON 7 February 2009 when powerful firestorms hit populated rural parts of the State of Victoria, killing 173 people and destroying more than two thousand homes. It is a label in which we can read some of the Australian ways of memorialising such events: as aberrations of an otherwise tame ‘nature’ gone wild, a series of traumatic events condensed into a single day to be collectively remembered among other catastrophes similarly labelled. Robert Kenny, historian, writer, artist and poet, survived the firestorm that hit his home in rural Victoria that day. He survived without physical injury—just—but lost much, materially and otherwise. He later concluded: ‘the whole sense of who or what I am in the world has been scorched’ (146). With this remarkable book, subtitled ‘An Investigative Memoir’, Kenny confronts his long-term emotional battles in the aftermath of the fire (the memoir part of the book), interweaving it with an examination of the many broader intellectual issues arising from his interest in the humanities (the investigative part): senses of place, home and belonging in settler-descendant Australia, the nature/culture dichotomy in Western philosophy, psychological trauma and remembrance, and, above all, the cultural ecology of fire. His examinations, personal and intellectual, are as confronting as they are elegant and erudite.

Kenny’s phenomenological depiction of the firestorm—a haunting embodied experience of fire captured in exquisite literary style—is particularly powerful and, in my opinion, the outstanding part:

I watch two-metre high flames rise from apparently barren earth and turn water into steam in the raging wind. ... Then the fire hits the house. It seems to shudder at the impact. ... I run across the garden to the shed I have been converting into a studio. I prop the laptop and the two paintings up against a chair and go back out. Across the smoking garden, through the kitchen window I see a mass of flames. The noise is unbearable. Smoke pours out the

open back door. I yell to Zepa. But I see or hear no cat. There is just a doorway into a flaming home. ... And what I see inside that door is banal, an assortment of coats hanging on hooks. I do not see them burn. I just see flame fill the doorway. Nothing but flame. It doesn't burn the things I see, it replaces them. They are gone. (19, 32, 34)

Reading the harrowing details of his survival one cannot help but wonder how anyone with such experiences does not end up entirely mad. Fire destroys, instils deep fear, and may bring a sense of terror, but, as Kenny points out, its usage also comforts and provides. These are contrasting threads throughout the book. From the warmth of the homely hearth, the benefits of cooked food and the renewal of pastures, fire is posited as integral to human societies. Fire, in this view, is both real and abstract, simultaneously natural and cultural.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is entitled *Smoke and Fire: 7 February 2009*. It includes Kenny's experiences during the destructive firestorm and his examination of fire in mythological, religious and psychological terms. The second part is called *Ash: February 2009–February 2010*. It captures his emotional turmoil after the fire, the sense of loss, and also addresses issues such as settler-descendant belonging in the Australian landscape. The third and final part is entitled *Forgetting: March 2010–*. It is, broadly speaking, a foray into the ruptures of trauma and Kenny's ongoing attempt to find hope. Since elements of each appear throughout the book these three parts are by no means entirely distinct. They are, perhaps, best viewed as Kenny's own temporal characterisation of his life since the fire.

In the structure and style of this investigative memoir also lies one of the book's difficulties: it is the account of an intellectual artist who, in his trauma and quest for answers, takes the reader to topics and issues in a way that may be seen to exemplify trauma itself: somewhat disjointed, rapidly and unexpectedly alternating between memoir and investigation, searching, jumping back and forth frequently. I say it is a *difficulty* in terms of structural cohesion, not a negative. It is after all an artistic accomplishment for the form and content of this book to reflect each other in this way. It nevertheless means that keeping up with the pace and alternations is challenging.

In Australia, Kenny writes, 'catastrophic fire is a rural thing' (39). Dwellers of the city environment, by implication, are largely shielded from it. In drawing on this rural-urban dichotomy, the indigenous-nonindigenous divide and varying Australian environmental relationships throughout the book, Kenny addresses some of the questions confronting most relatively young (post)colonial societies. Based on his historical investigations—including but not limited to European classical mythology, philosophy, art history, poetry, settler history, as well as

selected references to psychoanalysis, the environmental humanities and anthropology—Kenny asserts ‘it is impossible to separate fire in Australia from the triad of Aboriginal Australia, settler/migrant Australia and the environment, as much imagined entities as they are real’ (142). I will return to the latter qualification further below.

Among the issues Kenny investigates are the quest for belonging and knowledge of Australia among descendants of settlers and migrants, what is considered natural and what is not, and how such understandings relate to prior Aboriginal occupation, management and ownership of this land. He also investigates how contemporary Australian engagements with fire and the environment more broadly are reflected in rural building codes and architecture. I will focus briefly on his investigations with regard to Aboriginal and settler/migrant Australia.

Kenny’s analyses of Aboriginal Australia are, as we may perhaps expect from a historian, based on the written record, and particularly the historical record. He takes us to recorded ‘Aboriginal stories’, beliefs, mosaic burning practices, and notions of ‘country’ that resonate with the portrayal of Australia by historian Bill Gammage as ‘the biggest estate on earth’. It is a depiction by Kenny in which ‘for the Aboriginal Australian the physical characteristics and features of his or her “country” contain stories, family spirits, the sacred places of rites. They contain the knowledge of who one is’ (159). Such a general characterisation has, like ‘the biggest estate on earth’, political undertones which serve an Australian social and environmental justice agenda that may or may not be supported among readers. Analytically, and more critically in terms of Kenny’s scholarship, it reads as a rather a-historical caricature of tradition uninformed by contemporary empirical research and approaches. Moreover, it is unclear how his qualification above about ‘imagined’ and ‘real’ entities must be read here. Despite Kenny’s engagement with the anthropological literature, his references are largely restricted to mythology, mostly from the remoter parts of the country, and not to relevant processes of cultural change and continuity. In the context of long-term interaction between indigenous and nonindigenous people and significant cultural change across the country, his juxtaposition of indigenous-nonindigenous environmental engagements is unlikely to stand up to scrutiny in the present. Despite a wealth of productive analyses across the country focussed on interaction, away from bounded cultural entities and practices (e.g. Austin-Broos; Hinkson and Smith; Martin; Merlan; Meyers; Pilbrow; Trigger; Trigger and Ashe; Weiner), Kenny avoids important empirical questions about contemporary Aboriginal traditions, engagements with fire and the environment more broadly in a state like Victoria. In this context I had expected, for example, at least some critical engagement with the well-known 1998 judgement in the native title claim brought by the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal community in Victoria. In

his judgement, Justice Olney of the Federal Court of Australia used a confronting and much-discussed metaphor relevant to Kenny's narrative:

The facts in this case lead inevitably to the conclusion that before the end of the 19th century the ancestors through whom the claimants claim title had ceased to occupy their traditional lands in accordance with their traditional laws and customs. The tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgment of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs. (Olney, paragraph 129)

Kenny's positioning of Aboriginal tradition and customary land use, however, ignores entirely the significant cultural change referred to, which may leave readers uncertain about the implications of his intellectual investigations in this area.

As Martin argued, fire in Australia lends itself particularly to a study of cultural dynamics and 'the ways in which fire makes sense in terms of people's relations with each other and with the world in ways that are continually, eternally, created anew' (85). While, based on my reading of the book, Kenny is likely to agree with Martin's view of fire itself as 'neither a solely "social" fact nor a simply "natural" phenomenon but something else entirely: a new kind of collective or assemblage' (85), Kenny's cultural analyses nevertheless lack temporal and interactional dynamics.

With regard to forms of belonging among settler/migrants in Australia, his characterisations draw on a common trope. They are reminiscent of the historian Peter Read's personal reflections in his book *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* when he concluded 'my sense of the native-born has come—is coming' (223). Kenny similarly asserts that 'settler/migrant Australia is a place that is always "becoming" and the roots never quite take' (205). Such statements are either explicitly or implicitly comparative, juxtaposing Aboriginal Australians as 'icons of true belonging, role models, holders of superior spiritual knowledge, the real autochthons' (Trigger and Mulcock 312), a sentiment these authors found particularly strong among nonindigenous Australian environmentalists. Such comparisons too have undertones which may serve worthy political projects in the area of indigenous disadvantage and dispossession, but they analytically ignore the thoroughly intercultural social domain in which such contrasting bounded categories are more productively thought of as relational identities to be studied empirically (e.g. Merlan, 'Theorizing Relationality').

These critical notes, however, are not to diminish the importance of some of the investigative contributions and the regulatory questions Kenny has powerfully

reinforced: when will building codes be changed to avoid the construction of rural Australian homes akin to 'the perfect pyre' (24), and what do the popular Australian 'tree-change' lifestyle and concomitant rural residential subdivisions (often of previous farming land) mean in terms of environmental management, vegetation (re)growth, global warming, and the potential increase of catastrophic fire events in populated regions? Alternating with broader narratives about the social, religious and ecological role of fire, the consequences of Aboriginal dispossession, as well as lessons for trauma management, Kelly's literary ability to convey the harrowing embodied experience of his inferno survival in particular make this a book a must-read for those concerned with Australia's challenging environmental futures.

KIM DE RIJKE is a Lecturer in Anthropology at The University of Queensland. His current research in the field of environmental anthropology focuses on senses of place, community politics and environmental engagements in the context of contested resource developments in Australia (water and coal seam gas). Over the past eleven years he has also undertaken native title related research with Aboriginal people in Western Australia and Queensland.

Works cited

- Austin-Broos, Diane. *Arrernte present, Arrernte past: Invasion, violence, and imagination in indigenous central Australia*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- . 'Whose ethics? Which cultural contract? Imagining Arrernte traditions today.' *Oceania* 71.3 (2001): 189-200.
- Gammage, Bill. *The biggest estate on earth: How Aborigines made Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011.
- Hinkson, Melinda and Ben Smith. 'Introduction: Conceptual Moves towards an Intercultural Analysis.' *Oceania* 75.3 (2005): 157-166.
- Martin, Richard J. 'Sometime a Fire: Re-imagining Elemental Conflict in Northern Australia's Gulf Country.' *Australian Humanities Review* 55 (2013): 67-91.
- Merlan, Francesca. 'Beyond Tradition.' *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 7.1 (2006): 85-104.
- . 'Explorations towards intercultural accounts of socio-cultural reproduction and change.' *Oceania* 75.3 (2005): 167-182.
- . 'Theorizing Relationality: A Response to the Morphys.' *American Anthropologist* 115.4 (2013): 637-638.

- Meyers, Fred. 'All around Australia and overseas: Christianity and indigenous identities in Central Australia 1988.' *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 21.1 (2010): 110-128.
- Olney, Justice. *Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria* FCA1606. (1998).
- Pilbrow, Tim. 'The Magic of Narrative in the Emplotment of State-Subject Relations: Who's Telling Whose Story in the Native Title Process in Australia?' *Oceania* 83.3 (2013): 221-237.
- Read, Peter. *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Trigger, David S. 'Indigeneity, ferality, and what "belongs" in the Australian bush: Aboriginal responses to "introduced" animals and plants in a settler-descendant society.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14.3 (2008): 628-46.
- , and Jane Mulcock. 'Forests as Spiritually Significant Places: Nature, Culture and "Belonging" in Australia.' *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 16.3 (2005): 306-20.
- , and Wendy Asche. 'Christianity, cultural change and the negotiation of rights in land and sea.' *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 21.1 (2010): 90-109.
- Weiner, James F. 'The Appropriation of an Aboriginal Landscape in Northern New South Wales.' *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 22.2 (2011): 189-202.