

Literature Review

Land... how the hunger for ownership shaped the modern world

Winchester S. 2021. William Collins London

From time to time, this journal provides literature reviews drawing the attention of readers to recent texts which may be of particular interest. In the past, these have been largely academic in nature.

Winchester, however, is much more an author with a wider and more general readership. Over several decades, he has released substantial, deeply researched texts on geographical areas – *The Pacific* and *The Atlantic* - and more recently, texts such as ‘Exactly’ (2018), which traced the history of industrial design and processes.

This latest, substantial offering is based in part on Winchester’s own background as a geologist and also continues on from his earlier geopolitical work ‘The Map That Changed the World’ (2001). While all of these are presented for a general readership, there is no doubting the rigor of investigations and research that underpin all of these works.

For those involved in regional studies, this latest text highlights the critical historical, geographical and political characteristics that, often unrecognised, provide the parameters for a country’s or region’s contemporary activities and advancement.

Through a number of case studies, he traces back through to colonial periods of the 19th and 20th century that saw the inappropriate dealings with land resources and the setting of new boundaries that may have been politically convenient at the time but had little or no respect for the local, physical environments nor to the interests of previous inhabitants. Legal and often physical conflicts with the previous occupants were a frequent outcome with those groups often forced to relocate to areas where they had little or no cultural connection.

With that change, a bundle of new rights was imposed particularly related to the ownership of land and associated resources and usage. Conflicts often centred around the fundamental differences in concepts of individual and community (shared) ownership – of philosophical concepts of belonging and stewardship on the one hand and economic rationality and the role of black-letter law on the other. Many land tenure and inter-racial conflict issues today can be clearly traced to those times and approaches. Without mechanisms to successfully resolve such differences (which were rarely in place), they simply became worse over

time as one group tried to impose its will on another, often inflamed by political and commercial opportunism. Over time too, and based on the agricultural and mining activities by the new, increasingly dominant group, towns developed further enriching that group and encouraging further rounds of expansion.

Based on those wider observations, the author makes particular reference to Australia and New Zealand. He notes particularly the concepts of stewardship based on the knowledge of, and affinity to land, developed by the Australian aboriginals over, literally, thousands of years. By way of example, he details the observations of James Cook and Joseph Banks who recognised the wisdom of ‘cool burns’ in maintaining the Australian plant and animal communities in what was a generally hostile environment. Unfortunately, much of that was lost in the early years of colonial settlement and expansion, reinforced by the imposition of British law and, where necessary, military/police action. It is only in much more recent times that the value of that deep and holistic knowledge, linking the natural and human community environments, has been better understood and, to some extent, is being reintroduced.

New Zealand presents a different history of settlement, land use and reconciliation. Winchester observes that, unlike the Australian experience, Maori settlement occurred only from about the 14th Century. By the time the British arrived three centuries later, however, they had established a quite advanced social structure and sympathetic links with the natural environment. While much is made of the Treaty of Waitangi, Winchester notes that because of lack of certainty, suspicion and breaches, the final outcomes for the Maori saw their systems of community, laws, land use and ownership severely challenged through the following Maori wars and the introduction of European diseases. While subsequent advances have been made, it would be wrong to believe that, even now, underlying issues had been fully resolved.

As a general contextual piece, the text is recommended. Some of the wider, global observations made by Winchester throughout the text may appear at some distance from contemporary regional studies. There is, however, a basic tenet here. Many contemporary challenges to community and economic development, land use and governance are deeply rooted in fundamental, and often unresolved, historical precedents pertaining to concepts of land, its ownership and the nature of property rights in general.

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