

The Two Hemispheres of Peter Conrad: A Research Note

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[abstract]

Peter Conrad was born in Tasmania, Australia in 1948. The place has an ill-starred history which includes a hellish penal colony, genocide of its Aboriginal natives, and the destruction of its pristine nature. At the age of twenty, he crossed the equator “without a backward glance” and went to Oxford on scholarship. It was after another twenty years that he re-crossed the equator and returned to Tasmania to see the reality of the place and to discover his relation to it, and wrote *Behind the Mountain: Return to Tasmania* (1988). This research note attempts to survey Conrad’s hemispherical collision in *Behind the Mountain* and two more essays written in 2004.

[key words]

Peter Conrad, hemispherical collision, Tasmania

I

Peter Conrad was born in Tasmania, Australia in 1948. At the age of twenty, he crossed the equator and went to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. He was made a Fellow of All Souls College in 1970 and has taught English literature at Christ Church, Oxford since 1973. It was after two decades that he re-crossed the equator and visited his native place. He wrote a personal account of his journey back to Tasmania in a book *Behind the Mountain: Return to Tasmania*¹ (1988). It is a combination of travel, history and autobiography in twenty-four essays. And in 2004, he wrote two more essays on his view of Tasmania—“ ‘How to Like this Place’ ” and “Thirty-six Views of Mount Wellington”²—in public lectures delivered to mark the bicentenary of the state. He has many other distinguished works. Presently he lives in London and New York.

II

Conrad’s native country Australia has an ill-starred history. The indigenous people Aborigines settled there long before. However, its history started with the arrivals of a Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in the

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seventeenth century and a British navigator Captain James Cook in 1770 followed by the establishment of New South Wales by the British in 1788. What was so ill-fated about it was that the colony was settled primarily as a penal colony. And it is not an exaggeration to say that Tasmania's colonial story reflects the history of all Australia. Tasmania where Conrad came into the world lies some 240 kilometers from the southeastern coast of the mainland isolated by the Bass Strait. It is a wild and savagely beautiful island with pristine forests and mountains. It has strong British colonial foundations and is often referred to as "little England." Although transportation of convicts to the mainland ceased in 1840, it continued in Tasmania until 1853. Tasmania's suffering continued with the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines, the destruction of mountains and damming of the wild rivers. Thus, as Conrad mentions, Tasmania is "doubly isolated" (*Behind the Mountain* 110) —from the whole world and mainland Australia,—and Tasmanians are "victims of a twofold alienation" (*BTM* 3). People were made to bear a distorted identity. Conrad declares: "Insularity is a Tasmanian creed" (*BTM* 112).

III

It raises a big doubt how much a boy of five year old can be aware of such an ill-starred history behind him. In the opening essay of *Behind the Mountain* titled "Emohruo," Conrad writes about his home in Glenorchy, the northern suburbs of Hobart, the capital of Tasmania. The word "emohruo" is taken from a board displayed on a porch of the house exactly like his in the neighborhood. As it is a back-to-front word of "our home," his twisted conception of "home" can be understood. One Sunday afternoon when Conrad was four or five, his parents took him to a "gymkhana" at the showground near his house. Then all of a sudden, he got into a tantrum:

There were cheers from the track: someone or other had won a race. Wandering through the sparse crowd holding my father's hand, I began suddenly, inexplicably to cry. I remember the heat of the tears, and my gasping for breath in order to wail some more. (7)

This gray memory remains deeply within him. "Where *am* I?" (7), he was asking. Child as he was, he was oppressed with a desolate feeling of being in such an isolated place. He did not like the place, he hated it.

In Glenorchy, he felt confined. To the right of his house, there is Mount Wellington which looms up above Hobart and covers Glenorchy. With a height of 1,270 meters, it dominates the city and overshadowed his childhood. To the left, another mountain smaller in size, is Mount Direction. The two mountains forbade him any escape. And to the front is a zinc works spewing out white and purple smoke twenty-four hours a day. In "Thirty-six Views of Mount Wellington" written in 2004, Conrad remembers his pondering on the mill: "For me as a boy, the truly sublime spectacle was not the mountain but the zinc works, pestilentially fuming all night long on the scabrous hills of suburban Lutana: here were my 'satanic mills'" (150). Finally to the back is another man-made source of restlessness, a drive-in movie screen. Such was his ill-starred microcosm. Thus, supported by a scholarship, Conrad left home at twenty "without a backward glance"

(*BTM* 3).

After another twenty years, he returned to Tasmania for the first time to see the reality of the place and to discover his relation to it. He started by retrieving the familiar places; his home, Glenorchy, the main road from his house into Hobart, Mount Wellington, and the farm in Huon Valley where his mother grew up. He finishes the essay “On the Road” saying “The main road is the loop inside which all stations of my life are gathered” (*BTM* 29). His negative view of the place began to soften: “I had the feeling every moment that this was my belated first chance to see Tasmania properly, and also perhaps my last chance to see it at all” (*BTM* 46). Then he went to discover what was “behind the mountain,” Mount Wellington, beyond his childhood microcosm. He made journeys to the west coast, the east coast, the Tasman Peninsula where the notorious penal settlement Port Arthur was located, and the inaccessible national park of the south-west where the road resigns.

The view of Coles Bay or Wine Glass Bay on the sunny east coast made Conrad brood over the different attitudes toward nature:

The English dote on their country and, gardening, tend it with an adoring patience. Americans expect America to impress them: at Yellowstone, the tourists gather to watch Old Faithful spout as if he were one of Liberace’s fluorescent fountains; when the sun sinks through the crimson smog of New Jersey on summer evenings and disappears in a glare of toxins, the Greenwich Villagers on the banks of the Hudson are likely to give it a round of applause. Australians are neither so shamelessly fond of their land nor so naively awed by it. They remember that it was allotted to them as a punishment, and that it remains a deadly place. The compliments they pay it are the more heartfelt for being so rare, and so tersely expressed. (*BTM* 50)

This penal history runs deep in Australians and Conrad as well. Tasmania and its pristine nature have been colonized by a tragic civilization. It has even affected its natural scenery. For example, the harsh nature of the tip of the south-east coast, the Tasman Peninsula, was utilized as a natural prison. It seems quite pathetic that the people living in a town on this peninsula called Doo Town, trying to ignore this demoniac fact, have put up nameplates on their huts with names such as Love Me Doo, Doo Nothing, Make Doo, Much Adoo, and suchlike. Conrad, however, in his visit to the peninsula became well convinced of “the buoyant lightness” of human beings and enjoyed the grand beauty of Tasmania: “it is a world which never needed us, where we never belonged—and that is its beauty” (*BTM* 54).

“My childhood was overshadowed by a brutal, bad-tempered eminence: a mountain” writes Conrad. And he adds “Hobart belongs to Mount Wellington” (*BTM* 30). Then “we are its” (*BTM* 31), the writer unfolds. Conrad’s image of ill-starred Tasmania is embodied in the mountain. The foot of the mountain was covered with the vegetation of oak trees but beyond it was “a craggy monolith, bristling with spars of burned wood” (*BTM* 31). Emotions about mountains have been altered by history from Gothic horror to something romantic but Mount Wellington continues to include both images. Again it is because of this penal history that the mountain cannot eradicate its Gothic image:

One day it's as alarming as Mussorgsky's [B]ald [M]ountain, or the shaggy, witchy peaks where Mephistopheles leads Faust; the next it's benign, draping itself along the haze of the horizon like a dozing sun-bather. (*BTM* 32)

Conrad is superb in the use of simile. It is not only simile but also metaphor which fills his work. Since Tasmania has a strong British foundation everything there can be considered a facsimile of England.

Tasmania as a facsimile of England may also apply to their colonial painters: "Critics of colonial art complain that the painters, bringing their cultural assumptions and scenic schemes along in their luggage, couldn't even see the anomalous facts of Australia, let alone represent them" (*BTM* 171). Conrad devotes an essay to discussing thoroughly the paintings in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart. The iconography of eucalypts might explain the fact. Eucalypts are fast-growing evergreen Australian trees of various types. A eucalypt is a tree with many peculiar traits conforming to no English idea of trees. It grows tall and thin sometimes reaching three hundred feet high. The drab colored leaves do not defoliate but the bark is sloughed off throughout the year. Conrad takes up a painting by John Glover (1767-1849), a respected English artist who migrated to Australia in 1831. Glover applied rococo conventions to the Australian reality. In the painting, his eucalypts are wriggling in S-curves, the essence of beauty of lines in painting perpetuated by the English painter William Hogarth (1697-1764). Also their bark is not peeling off. Conrad did not mind this lack of faith in reality but felt a certain comfort instead. He explains that "reality needn't be taken as given: it was manipulable, according to your own compulsive way of seeing" (*BTM* 172).

Among the twenty-four essays in *Behind the Mountain*, the first twenty-two are Conrad's multi-faceted reality of Tasmania. The last two essays—"In the Family" and "The Main Land"—are his monologue or confession of his discoveries of his relation to Tasmania. First, he admits that he "ran away" from Tasmania. His father and mother were courageous and worked hard to settle themselves in the country but not their son: "I lacked their courage, and ran away" (*BTM* 217). Also it becomes obvious to him that he is "an unstable merger" of his parents both in personality and posture in spite of having lived so long apart:

After half a life, I had to admit that I was no self-created foundling, but a haphazard amalgam of other flesh; not even the mind had been left to my choice, since it was pressed into form by the landscapes I tried so hard not to look at. (*BTM* 218)

No matter how much he tried not to look at it, Tasmania was in his flesh and mind under an English facade: "When you leave home, it travels with you; the parents you think you can reject dictate from within your every action. You serve your sentence for the term of your natural life" (*BTM* 218). He admits further saying that it was his mistake to have trusted "the myth of self-invention" which he learned from the local ideology of New York: "You created yourself, and did so out of nothing. The past was permitted no claim." The return to Tasmania freed him of this notion. "[He] could feel [himself] disappearing into the people and places [he]'d been made by" (*BTM* 220).

It is all up to one's feelings as to how the landscape appears. When one is antagonistic, it becomes

sublime and when relaxed, beautiful, in Edmund Burke's categorization. On his last weekend in Tasmania, driving down from Launceston at dusk, he saw Mount Wellington, the symbol of his overwhelming island:

For once I felt it to be a cosy totem: a big dog stretched guardingly on the doormat, its head down, its slopes of rubble and seared wood now a blue fleece of shadow. The river in its valley was also pacified by light, polished to silver. The interim of evening beautifies but saddens everything. It is a passage between ages, between eternities—that scorched, vital brilliance; this calm, resigned numbness. You are lullingly rubbed out, relieved of existence. (*BTM* 222-223)

The mountain is no longer an animal ready to pounce, as it was in his childhood imagination, but is more like a watchdog. Conrad at last saw the beauty of the mountain and his place. It was "cosy" then. Back to Glenorchy, he no longer felt a sense of confinement. "What did it matter where you were? . . . What did it matter who you were?" He ignored his long standing inquiry saying "We are all convocations of atoms" (*BTM* 223).

Once during his return to Tasmania, he recalls the first departure: "Thinking back down that day-long vapour-trail over the Pacific, I could see that my emotional business with my native land would always remain unfinished." And he finishes the paragraph saying thus: "When I went back I was young enough still to feel the necessity of my ingratitude, and old enough to regret what it had cost" (*BTM* 162). In the real end of *Behind the Mountain*, he concludes:

Everything that constituted me had been made by the place I left long ago, where I would never live again. . . . Tasmania had set the terms of my life. The home you cannot return to you carry off with you: it lies down there at the bottom of the world, and of the sleeping, imagining mind. (232)

The hemispherical collision in Conrad seemed to draw to a close. In him, Australia lies under England.

IV

In 2004, sixteen years after he made his first return to Australia, Conrad again deals with similar themes in two essays; " 'How to Like this Place' " and "Thirty-six Views of Mount Wellington." This time he is more rational, the essays less autobiographical, in telling about his expatriation from Tasmania, Australia, the southern hemisphere and home.

Europeans who came to colonize the landmass in the southern hemisphere were not prepared to find strange and fearsome creatures there. They practiced the eradication of them and denied the place. Australians who were told that their surroundings were inferior tended to believe so. Conrad left such a place in quest of freedom and found it but returned to rediscover what he had left or lost. "Freedom need not entail denial" (133) says he in the former essay. Wherever he lives, he tries to create Tasmania around him; a tiny gully of tree ferns in the garden, a series of photographs and a drawing of places and people in Tasmania in the bedroom, and so forth. At night, he wriggles under the sheepskin rug which he bought from a shop in

Hobart wishing to dream of Tasmania. Now he appreciates the fact that he was born in Tasmania, Australia.

The very last essay to be discussed is “Thirty-six Views of Mount Wellington” which focuses on Mount Wellington “which frowns down on Hobart like a moody, domineering god” (135). Although the mountain was once a symbol of overwhelming Tasmania to Conrad and puzzlement or vexation to others, it was a gift to artists. It is a matter of some interest that Conrad got the numeral thirty-six from Hokusai’s thirty-six views of Fuji. Though short of the total, he enumerates the views of Mount Wellington depicted by artists. Introducing Burke’s twin categories of the sublime and the beautiful, Conrad chooses the male violence of sublimity for Mount Wellington for himself. Saying that the views of the mountain can be numberless, he claims that they all depend on the perceptions of the one who sees it as in *Behind the Mountain*:

Though we share the earth, each person’s experience of it is unique; the world is renewed when— thanks to imagination, the most miraculous of mental faculties—we see it through someone else’s eyes. (162)

Finally he discovers the universality of Mount Wellington and of Tasmania.

Notes

- 1 The book was previously published as *Down Home: Revisiting Tasmania* (1988) in England.
- 2 The two essays are printed as appendices in *Tales of Two Hemispheres: Boyer Lectures 2004* (2004) by Peter Conrad.

Works Cited

- Conrad, Peter. *Behind the Mountain: Return to Tasmania*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1988.
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研究ノート：ピーター・コンラッドの二つの世界

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【抄録】

ピーター・コンラッドは、1948年にオーストラリアのタスマニアに生まれた。その場所には流刑植民地と先住民のジェノサイド、そして自然破壊に代表される暗い歴史がある。20歳の時、奨学金を得て「振り返ることなしに」赤道を越えオックスフォードへ行く。さらに20年を経た後、今度は赤道を逆方向に越えタスマニアへ戻る。タスマニアという場所の現実を見、そして自分との関係を発見するためである。その時の記録が『山の背後—タスマニアへの帰還』（1988年）である。この研究ノートでは、コンラッドの二つの世界—北半球と南半球—を『山の背後』と2004年に書かれた2篇のエッセイを通して概括する。

【キーワード】

ピーター・コンラッド 北半球と南半球の対立 タスマニア