

**PHOTOGRAPHY AND AUSTRALIA.** By *Helen Ennis*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007. 158 pp. (*Photographs*.) US\$29.95, paper. ISBN 978-1-86189-323-9.

A ubiquitous part of our lives, photographs are remarkable social objects whose materiality inscribes different views of the world that are subject to multiple interpretations over time. Whether glass plate negatives or digital, photographs have a fascinating pull on us all and remain influential in the shaping of societies. In *Photography and Australia*, part of the *Exposures* series by Reaktion Books, Helen Ennis weaves together eighty photographs to thoughtfully argue for the centrality of photographic image-making to the Australian experience of being a settler nation. Influenced by Nicolas Thomas, Ennis shows how photography has been at the heart of the conversation about these enduring relationships over the last two hundred years. Rather than present a linear history, Ennis's chapters are complementary arguments about the nexus of race, place, colonialism and photography. Though focusing primarily on art photography, she deals with other genres without getting mired in technical histories and argues for a pervading theme of realism in Australian photography. Throughout the book, she brings into view photographs by, and of, Aboriginal Australians. This helps illuminate the ways in which Indigenous communities are reacting to these visual histories and are now active agents in their production. In doing so, Ennis skillfully advances one of her main purposes, which is that the photographs discussed will help unsettle what Australia is, and how it has been, and is, represented.

In chapter 1 ("First Photographs") Ennis effectively discusses the role of images in the beginning of the colony and how photographs were used to keep kin networks active with those in Britain. In chapter 2 ("Black to Blak") she charts the representation of Aboriginal Australians from being scientific objects to political activists. Here Ennis discusses how Aboriginal photographers recast historical images as part of the politics of recognition. Chapter 3 ("Land and Landscape") charts out the "erratic fortunes of landscape photography" (51), through which "nature" in the 1870s became a dominant theme of images made for sale to those who arose out of renewed environmental consciousness. The chapter deals with the tensions of displacement of Aboriginal communities that many of these images help with, and how photographers today work to readdress these histories. Particularly stunning in this regard is Rosemary Laing's 2001 work, "Groundspeed (Red Piazza)."

In chapter 4 ("Being Modern"), Ennis examines modernism, which she convincingly links to the emergence of the Sydney photographer Max Dupain, who in 1935 produced provocative images of industrial landscapes. Generated by newly arrived European émigrés, Australian modernism was distinctively national and international. Ennis charts out the move from

the more experimental phase of the 1930s to the realism and documentary style of the post-World War II phase characterized by Axel Poignant and others. Chapter 5 (“Made in Australia”) discusses documentary works, which emerged in parallel with the modernist movement in the 1930s. These images helped shape popular discourse by appearing in magazines, such as *Walkabout*, and participated in mythmaking that grew from “anti-urban and anti-intellectual sentiments” (94). The rest of the chapter looks at shifts since the 1970s.

Ennis takes up issues related to recent immigration in chapter 6 (“Localism and Internationalism”). She charts how as part of this process photographers have become more conscious of international trends and rejected essentialism. The multicultural experiences of Australians have resulted in varied but powerful responses as found in the work of Tracey Moffatt, Patricia Piccinini and Bill Henson regarding what Australia is and should be. The final chapter (“The Presence of the Past”) pulls together the major themes of the book. Ennis reiterates that photographs from Australia’s past offer us lessons for how images are used today as part of the rhetorics of race and nation. In doing so, she makes the claim that these visual histories are not inactive but that our engagement with them, and indeed contemporary artists’ engagement with them, is part of the largely negotiation of redemption through which Australia is working to come to terms with its settler-colony origins and what the future holds.

If I have any criticism of this book, it is that at times there is a slight disconnect between the text and the photographs presented. As a result many of the images are presented without detailed discussions. This is unfortunate, necessitated, I believe, by the book’s brevity and complicated scope. Along these lines, it would have been good if Ennis had noted the size of the photographs in the captions. These comments aside, Ennis is to be commended for providing a thought-provoking work about the multiple visual histories of, and in, photography that emerged from Australia, and by which pasts, presents and futures of the nation are being negotiated. As such, the book is suggestive of other trends found in other nations around the world and will be compelling reading for many.

*Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA*

JOSHUA A. BELL