

Peter Read, 2003. *Haunted Earth*. University of NSW Press. 265 pp., plus notes, index and bibliography. ISBN 0-86840 726 7. A\$ 29.90

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This is a strange book but a good Read. Its author is the co-founder of the organisation "Link-Up", without which Australia might have never had the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. He is also the author of such respected studies as *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (1996) or the more recent *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000). The latter in particular has done much to establish Read's reputation as a historian with strong affinities towards Aboriginal history and culture who will yet stake out a claim for non-Aboriginal ownership and emotional bonding with the land.

But this is a book in which Aboriginal myths and beliefs of the land play a subordinate role. Instead, it focusses on ghosts, apparitions, premonitions, incubi and witches, subjects that a sceptic like me calls New Age manure. In Read's own words, he is going to „explore the singular and often identifiable ghosts, deities,

souls and entities that inhabit a place“ (35). That sounds pretty heavy and also a tad dogmatic: not for a moment does he contemplate the option that spirits may be the creation of our own minds: for him and most characters in this book, they are as real as a brick house. Typically, the first chapter is set in a graveyard at midnight.

Read claims that three quarters of the world's population believe in spirits: he does not cite a source nor is there likely to be one. Perhaps I am the wrong sort of person to review such a book: I happen *not* to share the fashionable belief in ghosts and spirits, I demand proof of their existence. Mere stories of how people felt at certain "inspired" locations at certain moments or what dreams they had fail to impress me. There is a childhood memory that has taught me the powers of self-hypnosis. My mother was a stern woman who believed in punishing her offspring. Her most fearsome threat was that she would lock me into the basement, where *Rübezahl*, a 4-meter giant with an appetite for children, would put me into his wicker basket and take me away to his lair. One day (I must have been about five) I was really pushed behind that basement door, hugging the narrow steps that led into a vaulted cellar where mum kept her eggs and sauerkraut, her apples and lard. And sure enough, I began to hear the rumblings of a giant, I saw a flickering torch behind that corner, and I heard chains being chafed across the ground. I have never again been so terrified in my life. A decade afterwards, I concluded that my mother, to complete her cruel punishment, had climbed into the basement through a small window and had produced the visual effects and sounds that I had clearly perceived. When she was almost 80, I finally confronted her with this evidence of her Nazi pedagogics. She just laughed. What did I think her capable of, was her incredulous comment. And had I considered how tiny that window at ground level was – hardly big enough for a cat!? Of course she was right – in my panic I had hallucinated everything: the light, the sounds of chains, and *Rübezahl'* s growls.

But even for those who are not believers, Read presents an enjoyable panopticon of narratives with a rich eclecticism of perspectives. Having made the claim that three quarters of the global population believe in spirits, Peter Read paradoxically goes on to observe that most Australian do not experience the land as "inspired." Soon we discover that there are wildly divergent attitudes towards the relation between spirits and place. For Aborigines, who have the "most place-centredness of all the world's religions" (121), spirits are tied to a particular location, their powers fading with distance. In contrast, Hong Kong immigrants believe one can persuade an ancestral spirit to emigrate together with the family. A "Wiccan" (the more traditional term "witch" has apparently been cheapened by overuse) claims that spirits inhabit each molecule of the world, and can be summoned up for healing or punishment by the trained expert wherever s/he chooses. Hmm. But then there are also spirits who can be coaxed into a site and nurtured by humans, can receive given the right growth treatment such as the building of a temple, a shrine, a "stupa." And there are the spirits of the dead, forced to dwell at the site of an accident such as World War I, or the torpedoing of the cruiser *Armidale* in the Timor Sea in 1942. But then not all of

them are confined that way says Read, citing as “proof” the inscription on a headstone of digger killed in Flanders that says the soul of the fallen man has migrated by to Australia. Hmm. He also cites a catholic monk of a Benedictine monastery in the W.A. bush who has lived there for 28 years, but is unmoved by the idea that a place becomes “inspired” by humans, finding the Aboriginal notion of earth spirits slightly absurd. Read also cites the Hindu belief in thousands of spirits surrounding us, but they are not tied to the land but to objects (such as an urn or a shrine), and they can travel. Likewise Islam, which “conceptualizes the person rather than the place as the seat of divine presence” (241). You cannot blame the author of being one-sided when he piles up example after example that does not fit in with the theory of an “inspired” earth, but somehow he is unimpressed by his own evidence. Read goes on to tell the stories of three sets of bereaved parents whose children were untimely taken from them, and how they nurture a spiritual presence. Clearly, such parents are haunted, but where is the link to a “haunted earth?” And in the strangest section, he explores how the sinking of the battleship “Armidale” in December 1942 (the ship lies hundreds of miles away from the Australian earth at the bottom of the Timor sea, together with the majority of its crew) is commemorated by the survivors. So not only the land, but the bottom of the sea, too, can become an “inspired” site. With a linkage to a plaque in the Darwin harbour. Hmm.

Read has devised an intriguing structure to the book. It starts out with a midnight walk through a Sydney suburb graveyard, whose darkness parallels the disbelief of middle Australia in anything that is not “observable, countable and measurable.” This elicits the (unwarranted, I feel) lament “what limitations we western scholars place upon ourselves”, limitations that the book sets out to overcome. The next section titled “the darkest hour” presents three accounts by non-indigenous Australians of how they were or are haunted by Aboriginal spirits wishing to punish them for crimes committed by whites in the past. “Piccanniny Daylight” is set at 4 a.m. and presents dark stories of the bereaved parents mentioned above, while “Dawn” is set in an in-between phase, its space filled by the unpretentiously told story of a Bass Strait Aboriginal clan. Like dawn, the story is of an “in-between” kind, containing much suffering but also hope for new beginnings. This section is “vintage Read”, one of the best, elucidating present problems with references to historical facts; it also hints at the hopelessly fractured nature of the Aboriginal community of Tasmania and its undignified squabbles.

The two next “a.m.” sections have to do with the work of composer Ros Bandt, who picks up sounds from the “inspired” empty grain silos of dying country towns; and with the teachings of self-styled gurus in Buddhist meditation centres. The narrative tautness of the previous chapters is lost in the cosy morning light. Exhausted, one begins to doze off.

The afternoon heat presents more challenges. “Noon” returns to the creation of aeolian music, created by the wind in suspended wires. But it is the inspired land

that determines the wiry sounds, according to composer Alan Lamb. Hmm. Greater excitement is offered by the story of Keziah the witch: “standing barefoot upon the earth, she summons and focuses deep energies from the earth to heal the birds of the air above it.” Hmm. In the “late afternoon” section Read encounters resistance from a catholic abbot to his theory of a locally “inspired” land, admitting he had come to the Benedictines “with false expectations.” When “dusk” begins to fall, Read returns to hauntings that are tied to Aboriginal history. He visits farmer Claire Milner on her station in the NSW bush, a lady who embodies “continuity of past and present”. She has “witnessed many strange phenomena” and her sense “of absorption into the life and earth of the farm” is convincingly portrayed. Claire’s story of a highly vivid apparition (of some 30 Aboriginal people) when she had just begun to farm forms the counterpoint to the threatening apparitions detailed in the “darkest hour” section, and will very likely draw flak from the politically correct. Why so? The Aborigines in the apparition were not threatening and not reproachful. In her own words: *The Aborigines were saying to me: ‘we’re here, we’re part of it. It’s all right (my emphasis). It makes it much stronger for me.’* This can be read as an Aboriginal acceptance of white ownership of farming land, and as such will be controversial. In an earlier passage, Read observed that some Aborigines do not want whites to have a spiritual connection to the land, which they consider rightly theirs, and naturally the claim extends to its spiritual properties. They are not going to share *anything* of value any more. Still less do they accept white ownership that is free of guilt. Oh yes, they love non-indigenous guilt so much that they won’t let it go away.

The final chapter “Towards Midnight” concludes the circular journey and leads us to Burra in South Australia, where the Burra Charter on the “conservation and management of places of cultural significance” was signed in 1979. Is “cultural significance” the same as “inspired”? Read thinks it by and large is, but cites the example of the Australian Heritage Commission which lists cultural sites (such as a cathedral) only for their architectural qualities, not for their spiritual value. The same applies to some Aboriginal sites: shell middens for example are listed for their archeological value, not for any spiritual properties they may possess. And the present government in its wisdom and sensitivity has recently removed three quarters of the listed entries, sparing only such safe and sugary items as the Sydney Opera House. Howard has thrown Australia’s cultural sites overboard, as it were. As for Read, he concludes his book in a far more open style than I at first feared, allowing a great many variations on the theme of how and when and where places attain spiritual significance. Let me close with an extended quotation:

Sites have held their own inspiration from the beginning. They may have been energized by humans, or by the whole of the natural world. Energies may have been focused or created by ritual, or they may have accumulated as a by-product of meditation, but every person in this book to write or speak of their inspired places has identified its specificity, its localness as fundamental to the experience.

(...) This book about inspired places has become a study also of the value and meaning of locality. Locality with which we are physically, emotionally and spiritually familiar offers alternatives to the polarities of encroaching global uniformity and the eroding sovereign national state (255).

What Read has omitted to say is that at the end of the book he is a changed writer. Nothing in his study prepared me for the introduction of "global uniformity" and the "eroding sovereign national state" as enemies of the spiritual. These are important thoughts that considerably mollified my resistance to what I wrongly perceived to be a lapse into superstition and the world of the irrational. And so as the writing of the book changed the writer, its reading has changed, though ever so slightly, this reader.