

John Cameron's *Blackstone Chronicles: Placemaking on a Tasmanian island* (2016)

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John Cameron has been involved in place based study for years and has published many papers, book chapters and an edited collection on the subject as well as founding the Australian Sense of Place Colloquium. The *Blackstone Chronicles* is, in one sense, a continuation of that work, but in another sense it signifies a step change; it is a deepening and enlargement of that lifetime of engagement with place questions. Cameron's previous work included the experiential in good measure. For example, his tracking of the physical, emotional and conceptual change in his reception of and engagement with gardens in his chapter for *Changing Places: reimagining Australia*. In this earlier work Cameron demonstrated the phenomenological skills of investigating experience, which he brings to life through honest reporting and insightful interpretation. The *Blackstone Chronicles* builds on that previous work but goes much further. The life changes of leaving University work and moving to Blackstone (his home on Bruny Island, Tasmania) has meant that John – and here it seems appropriate to switch to first name terms in view of the deeply personal nature of this book - could apply that same diligence to phenomenological experiencing and recording on a longer term and larger scale project. Moreover, it is a project that entails engagement and change at all levels. The results are astounding.

The *Blackstone Chronicles* records a journey from the discovery of a 44 acre smallholding through building a life there and engaging with the place, its history, culture, flora and fauna, and landscape forms. The engagement is intimate, detailed and deeply contextual as John and his partner, the artist Victoria King, come to know this place and shape its development through an attentive heartfelt listening.

This could make it sound like a practical guide to conservation on a smallholding or a self-indulgent account of a personal story. It is neither. The *Blackstone Chronicles* is a guide to the application of phenomenological method to living an emplaced life. An early chapter is a detailed account of applying Goethean observation to a puzzling geological phenomenon at the water's edge. John takes the reader through something more personal than a method set out; he gives the sense of what it is like engaging with nature in this way. An early revelation, afforded by the rocks, that develops through the book is the movement from being receptive to nature in the special moment to taking that quality of attention into everyday life.

In living a life, rather than simply enjoying a field trip excursion, a deeper connection to place is possible, but also hard decisions have to be made. The central theme of making a connection to the natural world is challenged early on with the issue of invasive weeds impacting the effort to restore native trees. The story of the battle with weeds is one of the remarkable strands of the book. John gives an account of the struggle with the being of the thistle in both the backbreaking physical labour and the inner transformation that has to take place to arrive at a new relationship. The older trees in the place suffer from both climate change and previous incursions and through a close study, which is actually a heartfelt being with them, their stories start to unfold.

Lessons are learned throughout the engagement with place as John and Vicki's lives become more and more woven into the fabric of their land and the local community. Synchronicity, though not discussed in those terms, plays a role with many interesting juxtapositions and meaning enriched

coincidences. A sense of responsibility permeates their interactions with place. This is brought to a dramatic point when neighbouring land is advertised for potential development and concern for personal privacy, wildlife conservation and cultural heritage is added to their more immediate concerns. A search for the remains of an inter-culturally significant sod hut on the land begins and this is followed through with, backwards in time, place based imagining and historical research leading to the impulse and the ability to purchase the land. Through their researches the land has now been registered by the Heritage Council as permanently protected from development.

Although the book is shaped through episodes and themes there is always a circling back – like the birds of Bruny island – to the physical, psychological and spiritual processes of coming into relationship, of braiding together oneself with the land's other inhabitants: the wildlife of wallaby, quoll, heron, and eagle; the vegetation of grasstree and Californian thistle; the tangible spirit of those who have gone before; and the salt and iron of the shore line. The relationship is deepened through responding with art processes along with meditation and ecological study. Resultant artwork from these processes by both John and Vicki illustrate the book and help the reader to live a little closer to their experience.

Reading the text is like engaging with a piece of organic inquiry research. The phenomenological discipline of recording experience and the, sometimes searing, self-deprecating veracity of John's writing brings the experience of the human/place encounter alive.

In a later chapter consideration of our sensory modalities comes to a moving crescendo when John is experiencing serious medical problems with his eyes and has to face the prospect (oh how our language is littered with visual metaphor!) of blindness. The various treatments and the shifts and changes these bring about is recorded because the research never stops – each change or deprivation becomes an opportunity to experience the world differently and its fruits are placed before the reader. The potential loss of the visual is all the more moving because of what has gone before.

A previously reported remarkable encounter is when John experiences an evening alone by a campfire on the beach and feels drawn to take a canoe out on the water. This time the 'gift' from nature is the experience of phosphorescence in the sea. The experience and its detailed analysis demonstrate phenomenological description at its best. The discussion of this as an invitation from nature that was, on this occasion, heard and responded to helps to develop a major theme of the book. How can we do this? How can we enter into this relationship as human subjects capable of stripping away our trivial concerns and yet use our human subjectivity to forge that connection. The Blackstone Chronicles demonstrates that this is possible and functions as a guide.

No commentary on the book can leave out the birds and their role as guides, emissaries, inspiration and constant friends. It is the birds who become, through careful study and listening, the signs that guide and confirm activities and changes and assist the emplacement of John and Vicki as part of Blackstone.

Isis Brook