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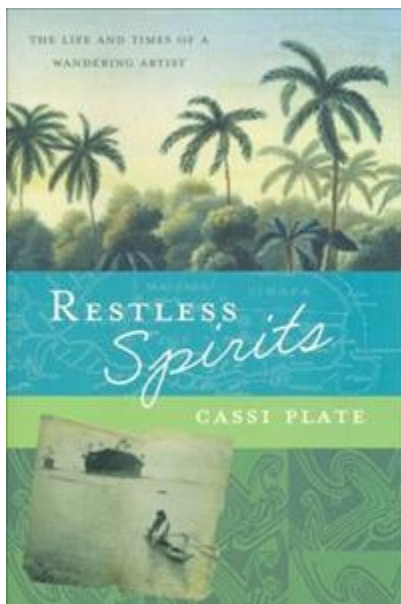
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Review of *Restless Spirits: The Life and Times of a Wandering Artist*

By Cassi Plate
Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2005
(337 pages, ISBN 0330421646)



I first became interested in the work of the German-born sailor and artist Adolph Plate (1874–1914) when researching the depiction of Western Australia’s plant life in early twentieth-century poetry, visual art and historical documents. My attention turned towards one image in particular: Plate’s ‘Untitled [WA Bush Scene with Ringbarked Gum]’, a watercolour painted in 1912 when the enterprising artist and his family took up a parcel of land east of Geraldton to cultivate wheat. ‘Untitled’ was created

soon before Plate and his young family left Perth for Sydney where he would die abruptly, at age 40, from throat cancer.

What is it about this image of a Wheatbelt gum that draws me in? I think it’s the story of the tree’s circumferential gash—a graphic testimony to the land-clearing practices of settlers (here exemplified by ring-barking) during a time of rapid environmental change in the Wheatbelt. In this region, more than ninety percent of the pre-settlement eucalypt woodlands have been eradicated, a transformation in part fuelled by the misplaced pastoral dreams of European-born settlers like Adolph Plate. But the appeal of the image also reflects the complex story of Plate himself and the many societies—as well as cultural and environmental values—he navigated during his brief, intense life.

Restless Spirits stems from Cassi Plate’s 2002 doctoral thesis completed at the University of Technology, Sydney, ‘Wandering Ghosts, Land and Landscape: Restless Spirits in the Culture of Colonialism’. Plate’s thesis was chosen by esteemed author and editor Drusilla Modjeska as the pilot project for the three-year ‘From Thesis to Book’ initiative, funded by the Australian Research Council. Part of Modjeska’s vision involved a partnership between publisher Pan Macmillan and the University of Sydney in which academic texts would be adapted for the public market. I suspect that part of the ‘adaptation’ of the original version of *Restless Spirits* entailed softening the theorisation that most typically defines university theses. Indeed, while Plate invokes old standards like philosophers Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, she refrains from leading the reader into abstruse conceptual tangles. Instead, she

follows zealously the compelling story of her grandfather and her narrative of tracing his movements nearly one-hundred years after the height of his powers.

Cassi Plate's research process in Western Australia particularly intrigues me. She draws upon a rich bed of information, including Adolph's paintings and writings; accounts of her grandfather's exhibitions in Perth newspapers; legal documents such as leases; first-person impressions from visits to the places depicted in Adolph's works; and visits to the several properties around Western Australia owned by his family during their brief tenure in the State. As Plate makes clear from these resources, in some respects Adolph's Western Australia saga was not unusual—but what distinguishes the story is the steadfast restlessness coupled to a profound creative vision which characterised the course of his life and subsequently his family's.

In the first pages of *Restless Spirits*, Cassi Plate brackets Adolph's years of travel as 1887 to 1914. In other words, her grandfather spent two-thirds of his life and all of his adult years as a 'restless spirit'. Although his South Pacific years are presented early on in the book, I'm especially interested in his Western Australia period during which he reached an apex of recognition as a painter of landscapes. In 'Part Five: Unsettled Land', she tracks Adolph's arrival in WA in 1907 where he set out to pursue the challenges and rewards of land ownership. Again, Plate's analysis of her grandfather's itinerant labours recognises his ambivalence towards land—as the object of art and settlerism. The author makes this plain: his activities as both a pastoralist and artist reflect a conflicted vision of 'landscape' as something to be

appreciated on its own terms yet manipulated by the colonial imagination.

As one interested in the relationships between nature, aesthetics and colonialism, I find Cassi Plate's distinction between land and landscape quite generative. For instance, in describing John Winthrop Hackett's (1848-1916) purchase of her grandfather's watercolour *Dinninup, evening* for the emerging Art Gallery of Western Australia collections, Cassi Plate observes: 'It was the earliest sign of a story which grew between the two men, of the relationship between *landscape and land*, between *spectacle and speculation* [emphasis added]'. As such, *Restless Spirits* is also about the aesthetic sensibilities that settlers imported into frontier lands like Western Australia where 'park-like' appearances were applauded because they were reminiscent of a home somewhere in the northern hemisphere. Early settlers of course were less aware that 'park-like' appeal was characteristically the result of Aboriginal land management practices. Her grandfather's perception of the endemic trees of Western Australia also reflects his dualities: '[he] alternates between assessing their mercantile value, and praising their vulnerable grandeur. They are desired objects, and destroyers of a settler's very existence'.

Plate's account of her grandfather is not an ordinary family history, one written to extol or idealise the settlers who carved an existence out of the land, one written at some level to exonerate one's forebears. *Restless Spirits* reassures me that any account of a human life should comprise the laudable and the regrettable, equally. In a milieu like Western Australia where forgetting the past is still an unfortunately strong contemporary drive, Plate's message is critically important to

the conduct of regional historical research. Her portrait balances Adolph's humanness as he searched for artistic gratification and, later in his life, agricultural and pastoral wealth. The following passage, I think, is representative of the spirit of equanimity with which she approaches her grandfather's story:

For my grandfather, to settle or belong meant, ideally, cultivation of the land and the mind. The principle of coexistence with nature (the German love of forests) became a central paradox, as he promoted agricultural expansion and admiration for the natural world; he cut down the trees he wished to paint in order to graze sheep and plant wheat. The reality of one came at the expense of the other.

An illuminating part of Adolph Plate's value system towards nature may be found in his contributions to *The Leeuwin*, Western Australia's first literary journal. The journal, which only ran 6 issues beginning in 1910, displays a mix of literary eliteness and settlement boosterism. Some sources cite social activist and poet Willem Siebenhaar (1863-1936) as the founder and Adolph Plate as co-editor along with journalist and editor Alfred Chandler (1852-1941). However, Cassi Plate argues that *The Leeuwin* was Adolph's idea: 'He wanted to establish the state's first monthly arts magazine and he needed a committed group of people to work with'. The history of *The Leeuwin* would make for an interesting story in itself, involving as it did some of the most influential literary figures of the early 1900s in the State.

The greatest triumph of Cassi Plate's *Restless Spirits* is the eloquence with which the book recognises Adolph Plate's dualities while, at the same time, celebrating his achievements as an artist,

publisher and one of Western Australia's early European settlers. Through careful and dedicated (in fact, zealous) research, Cassi makes her grandfather's elusive complexities the book's central exploration. In doing so, she creates a beautifully nuanced, thoughtfully presented and strikingly personal account of Adolph's 'restless' periphrations—from his early years as a young South Pacific mariner to his later years as a recognised landscape artist, literary publisher and pastoral entrepreneur. In particular, I recommend *Restless Spirits* to anyone interested in the literary, cultural and environmental history of Western Australia in the early 1900s.

-Review by John Charles Ryan