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A LANDSCAPE PHOTO ALBUM AS SELF PORTRAIT

Andrew Taylor

For the last decade or so I've made a habit of driving from Adelaide, where I've been attending Writers' Week at the Adelaide Festival of Arts, to Melbourne. In the second week of March the weather can be very hot, or already bearing more than a subtle hint that summer has come to an end. This is most noticeable because of the route I take, hugging the coast as closely as I can. The beaches look as golden as ever, the surf as inviting. But a cold wind can slice along the sand. It is, after all, the Southern Ocean that I'm skirting.



Cape le Grand National Park, WA.

Image by Andrew Taylor

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I've been living in Perth for twenty years. But before that I lived in Adelaide, and before that in Melbourne. Before that, even, I lived in Warrnambool, on the west coast of Victoria, which is where I was born and grew up, and my brother and his wife still live there. So every two years, in March, I visit them and use that opportunity to explore the coastline of my childhood and adolescence.

On my most recent trip I took, as always, my camera. With digital cameras people today take countless, literally countless, photos and I'm no exception. When Susan Sontag wrote in 1977 that 'photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing' (Sontag, 8) she could not foresee the astronomical expansion of photography that resulted from digital cameras becoming commercially available in 1990. My computer is crammed with thousands of images, almost none of which I ever look at after that first enthusiastic viewing when they're downloaded. Hundreds of images of Rome, of Shanghai, of Germany, the USA ... wherever I've been slices of them are stored away neatly in my Apple Mac, most of them unlikely every again to see the light of day.

How different that is from the days when amateur photography was still something of a novelty. Those images of writers in the 1920s – Hemingway, Faulkner, Pound and, earlier, Whitman, their images treasured in libraries and now digitised so we can share the extraordinary privilege of reading not only their works but also their faces, their expressions, their gestures, their interactions with each other. In contrast, for most of us today photography is a careless capturing of a moment, as readily deleted as stored. Or to put it another way, photography today for most of us is an activity, a kind of staccato seeing, and not the producing of something lasting and memorable. Sharing photos in the instant seems to be the preferred means of handling images today: the two hundred and fifty million images uploaded to Facebook every day might seem to

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be there for the benefit of posterity, but in reality their life is limited to a few days or months of ephemerality. Even photographs of one's children are not immune: photos gave way to home movies, home movies to videos, and videos may possibly outlast, in their obscurity, the technical means to play them back. Then again, who knows how long a DVD or any other storage medium will last? Unless one is a professional, or a truly dedicated amateur in the literal sense of the word, the photos we take are headed for oblivion. And because it's so easy to take more, and still more, we don't really care.



The beach at Windy Harbour, WA.

Image by Andrew Taylor

There is, however, one bulwark against this apparently inevitable trend. The photo album.

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How old fashioned that sounds! As a child I used to leaf through the stiff cardboard pages of grandparents in their high lace collars and stuffy black suits, an array of children standing or reclining around them. Not a family tree, but family as a pyramid. Or later, my mother and her sisters in tennis dresses, always tennis dresses it seems in the 1920s. Or my young parents and their car, my father already going bald, somewhere in the Coorong, on their honeymoon; and later my brother and sister (also in tennis dress) and little me wearing short pants and a shy and freckled smile. Photo albums seemed to peter out, at least in my family, by the time I got into trousers. Home movies had come.

But now they're back. The very digital technology that is the harbinger of oblivion has also made photo books the very means of withstanding the double threat of the onslaught of time and our own lack of care. How long these new digitally produced books will last is anybody's guess. But paper lasts longer than most modern media – thousands of years! And digital books have changed our attitude – or at least mine. Once more I want to pluck images out of the relentless outgoing tide of time, to fix them, at least for a moment, in a medium that has a long history of durability, within my attention. I don't have a sense that I can hold the whole world in my head, as Sontag claimed was 'the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise' (Sontag, 3), but I can make 'an anthology of images' in a book whose pages I can turn and whose paper I can feel.

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The idea of making a photo book of my drive from Adelaide to Melbourne came only after the first day. I'm not a photographer, and my equipment is the simplest: a Canon IXUS 850 IS, which I chose because it fits into my pocket. And a MacBook Pro. Neither of them new. In the days of film I had a Zeiss Contaflex, a superb old camera that had been my father's, and a Pentax with no end of lenses. But I gave up using them – and taking photos as well – because they were heavier than I wanted to carry on my travels, and because I wasn't much of a

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photographer anyway. It was only ten years ago that I bought my first digital camera, the one that died on me in New Zealand when it clattered against the handrail of some beauty spot. It was cheaper to buy a new one than have it fixed, and that is what I still use.

So why did I decide to make a photo book? As I said, it was not something planned in advance. It was only when I got to Robe, after my first day's drive, that the project dawned on me. And it dawned on me because of where I was.

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Several years after moving to Perth from Adelaide I published a book of poems called *Sandstone*. The suite of poems by that name was an attempt at connecting the two 'ends' of my life, as they then were, in terms of the coastal landscape that they shared: the rough, sandstone cliffs and sandy beaches of the Southern Ocean at Warrnambool, where I grew up, and the calcified sandstone and limestone cliffs near Perth and its apparently endless beaches facing the Indian Ocean. But the whole of the southern Australian coast from Robe in South Australia to Geelong in Victoria was part of my youth and even of my young adult life. It contains some of the most spectacular coastal scenery in Australia, including the massive cliffs and deep folding rain forest hills along the Great Ocean Road. I know it intimately, and have watched it change over more than fifty years: London Bridge collapsing, the Twelve Apostles diminishing to seven or eight. Coming back from boarding school in the nineteen fifties I would inspect the cliffs at Thunder Point to see which still remained, which had succumbed to the power of the winter storms. That coast is never finished. The land is slowly rising from the water, and the ocean is relentlessly claiming it back.

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A storm at Canal Rocks, WA.

Image by Andrew Taylor

It was not a desire to catch it in a moment of artificial stasis that brought me to think of preserving it in a photo album. Rather, as I watched the moon rise over the lake in front of my motel room in Robe, that first evening of my drive, it struck me that I too was part of a process – in fact, part of the same process. This was my coast, and like it I was moving on yet always somehow in touch with what I had been. This is not nostalgia, a desire to live in the past. (Sontag wrote that ‘when we are nostalgic, we take pictures’ (Sontag, 15)). On the contrary, it is an acknowledgement of the passage of time and the changes it brings, seen in the light of where one has come from and what used to be. A photo album, I decided that evening as I watched the full moon shrink to a normal size and colour as it rose above the lake, would be a way of being simultaneously in motion and sitting still. It would be a traveller’s testament, something done on the run, but also a pause, a moment to sit and briefly reflect. It would not be a book of beautiful images, but a book of snapshots, taken from a car window, or where I was sitting to have lunch, or wherever I happened to be.

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But of course many of the images are beautiful. More precisely, they are images of beautiful things, snapped by an amateur with a simple digital camera because of his deep involvement with and love of that coastline. Back in Perth, as I sorted through all those snapshots, and others I had taken of places dear to me, I discovered very few people in them, but many moments where water and land meet. Tiny figures wandered on a beach somewhere, or perhaps a boat was just visible in the distance. But these were overwhelmingly images of coastal landscape, or riverscape. And yet they were also, I came to realize, in some way images of me.

Why were there no people in my photos? My wife photographs people, and she is a far better photographer than I. I like talking to people, I enjoy their company, I get lonely when I'm alone for too long. I'm a poet, and share language with others. I have no desire to write poems and hide them in a drawer. And in fact my original idea for a photo album was that it contained poems as well. (The program I was using put paid to that.) Yet left to myself I search out the uninhabited places: an empty stretch of river for my kayak or the apparently endless sweep of the cliffs and beaches of South Eastern or Western Australia. What does this say about me?

I have always been a person for whom margins, where something meets something else, has been my natural habitat. Back from boarding school in Melbourne I headed unerringly to the beach, even in winter, even before surfing became common. The beach, the coast, is where what we know, where we live, what we can walk on and hold firm to, meets all that it isn't. The sea is what we can't live in. We can travel across it, as I did by boat on my first visit to Europe, or sail on it. And we can paddle on it – by kayak and canoe – or in it, as children do. We can't see much below its surface, and its moods are extreme, from unmatched violence to a benign and welcoming placidity. It is not for me that

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cliché of the Unconscious, as it is commonly held to be. It is more elemental, even more existential, than that. It is what we aren't, yet also what we are, just as the land is. Where they meet is where I find myself meeting myself. And what goes for the ocean goes also, I feel, for the river.



Sunrise at Robe, South Australia.

Image by Andrew Taylor

I've been kayaking the Swan River in Perth for more than a decade and it offers me the same mysteries as the ocean, but in a different form. I have a patch of wetland – swamp, I prefer to call it by its traditional designation – that no powerboat can penetrate, the water being so shallow. I share it with the birds – egrets, spoonbills, ducks of all kinds, ibis, fish eagles, cormorants, darters, swans. I've never encountered another human in there. It's only about three kilometers from the Perth CBD, but there is not a house, road or power line to be seen. Like the ocean, it is what I'm not, yet as I guide my gliding kayak around the fallen

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trees that snag in the water, puddle the algae that I stir up and listen, listen to its own silent voice, I feel that I am also encountering myself.

Nine years ago I expected to die. I had advanced cancer and the prognosis was bleak. Like many others, as I later learned, I found that this was not an occasion of despair but one of enormous gratitude for what life had given me. I felt elated that the world was so beautiful, dynamic, so full of... well, so full of life! And that I was, at least for a moment, able to share it. As William Blake wrote, 'If the doors of perception are cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite' (Blake, 254). I was, at that time – to use a cliché – at death's door. I could see both my side of it, and what was on the other side. It held no fear for me, because it was another meeting of what I knew was myself with what I did not know, yet knew was also myself. It would be the end of me – I have no comforting delusions of an afterlife. But as any good writer knows, the end of whatever you write is as important as what comes before. It is part of the whole.

During my illness I received invaluable support from my family and from the health professionals that attended me. My only regret was the sadness and loss that those dear to me might suffer. Yet in a situation like that, one is inevitably alone. When in my dark ward I could hear the anguish of the Greek family along the corridor whose grandmother, admitted only a few hours earlier, had died, I knew the old lady was beyond that. Grief is for the living, not for the dead. When I lay awake at night beside me sleeping wife, wondering whether I would still be alive at my daughter's next birthday, I was not troubled by this speculation. But I felt the ethical responsibility not to share it with her, because she *would* have been troubled. This was something I had to handle alone. Love undoubtedly 'takes us out of ourselves', as the cliché goes. We would be a diminished, barren species if it didn't. Nonetheless we must acknowledge that we are, each of us, only ourselves, in all our duality. The photographs I took of the coast and of the

river are, I think, images of, even a celebration of, that ultimate aloneness, in which one can look at, and recognize, oneself.

To others, my photo album is probably just a book of photos of a spectacular coastline and also the river in Perth I paddle on. They will look at it and say 'How pretty' or something equally polite. That is all right, because that is all it will be to them. But to me it reveals something about myself that I didn't know, or was not so aware of, before that evening in Robe. The American poet Wallace Stevens wrote that 'Perhaps / The truth depends on a walk around a lake... a stop to watch / A definition growing certain...' (Stevens, 386). My photo album is, for me, that stop, that step out of the continuous flux of time. It is not a finish, but a pause where something reveals itself. It is where I can see not only the coastline and riverscape that have been so much a part of my life, but also a reflection of myself.

Perth 2012.



Evening on the Swan River, Perth Image by Andrew Taylor

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