

Poe(trees) of Place: Forest Poetics in Lithuania and Tasmania

Claire Jansen (*University of Tasmania*)¹

Abstract:

Analysing the poetic ecology of the forest as a cultural landscape offers insight into ecocritical consciousness. This article compares Lithuanian national and Tasmanian colonial poetics, and examines post-colonial poetry linked to the Tasmanian conservation movement. Starting in nineteenth century Lithuania under Russian rule, this article examines The Forest of Anykščiai by Antanas Baranauskas in English translation. The poem, a national anthem to a cleared forest, reconstructs an entire ecosystem and imbues it with Lithuanian mythology. In this way, the poem re-inscribes Lithuanian forests as nationally significant, and inextricably linked to culture, sense of place and the struggle against Russian colonisation and imperialism. Nature becomes a nationally unifying symbol and forests in particular are represented as cultural landscapes. In far away Tasmania, the island state of Australia, a violent colonial past has also been unfolded in the setting of extensive forests. In nineteenth century Tasmania, however, the forest poetics were written by members of the colonising power, people who saw forests as hostile, dangerous places, and whose political agenda included the social legitimisation of the invasion of inhabited lands. Therefore, in many examples of Tasmanian colonial poetry, the representation of Nature as silent and empty of life deletes the ecological presence of forest. The silencing of the forest neatly accompanied the denial of any indigenous history of the land. This has had the effect of enacting the colonial doctrine of terra nullius and participating in a literature of indigenous "extinction." More recently, a post-colonial re-awakening of the sound and breath of organic forest ecologies has occurred in poetry associated with the Tasmanian conservation movement. There has also been a deliberate re-inscription of indigenous history in post-colonial poetics that includes human interaction with Nature as part of an environmentally sustainable vision for the future.

¹ Claire Jansen Department of English, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia 7001
cjansen@postoffice.utas.edu.au

Introduction

Forests are dynamic ecosystems, scientifically documented communities of flora and fauna, a physical environment with which humans interact. Yet in poetry, forests can be represented as important national landscapes or silent, empty spaces. This article conducts a comparative study of nineteenth-century Lithuanian and Tasmanian forest poetics, and analyses post-colonial poetry in relation to the Tasmanian conservation movement as a means by which to differentiate between nationalist, colonial poetics on the one hand, and post-colonial poetics on the other. Lithuania and Tasmania both have culturally and environmentally significant forest landscapes that are intrinsic to their inhabitants' sense of place. They also share violent colonial histories. Engaging with cross-cultural poetic texts demonstrates multiple and shifting forms of ecological and ecocritical consciousness, and in this case, helps to differentiate between nationalist, colonial and post-colonial perspectives.

Re-inventing a Lithuanian forest Arcady, Antanas Baranauskas' nationalist poem, *The Forest of Anykščiai*, represents a poetic ecology imbued with myth and memory, and serves to embolden and legitimise a Lithuanian national identity. This poem lends itself to analysis by academics who are not fluent in Lithuanian because of its multiple translations that offer a comprehensive guide to the original. Many Tasmanian colonial poems from the same period as *The Forest of Anykščiai* contrast with it by silencing Nature through the reductive lens of the colonial gaze. The effect deletes the ecological presence of forest and negates an indigenous history prior to European arrival. However, of late, a post-colonial poetic revival of complex forest ecologies primarily linked to the Tasmanian conservation movement does seek to give Nature a voice. Entwined in this is the inclusion of an indigenous and non-indigenous peoples' history of place seen more and more as intrinsic to future sustainable human interaction with forest environments.

Baranauskas' Re-invention of a Lithuanian Forest Arcady

In Lithuania, forests have historically been held in reverence in relation to a Nature-based religion in which various plants and animals were deified or believed to be imbued with spiritual significance. In 1934, Nadas Rastenis translated Antanas Baranauskas' *Anykščiu šilelis* into English as *The Forest of Anykščiai*. Clark Mills and Demie Jonaitis produced "The Pine Grove of Anykščiai" in 1962, and Peter Tempest's *The Forest of Anykščiai* was published in 1985. The long poem is an expression of outrage over the ecological destruction, by Russian colonisers, of the forest surrounding the small village of Anykščiai. It is a lament for the forest, as well as for the nation and childhood. Baranauskas wrote the poem in the summers of 1858 and 1859, at a time when the Lithuanian language was out of favour with higher classes and most publications were in Polish or Russian (Tininis 10; Strazas 60-62). He did so partially in response to a challenge that such natural beauty could only be described in Polish (Tininis 17). The famous Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz, had set a strong precedent. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth existed for more than four centuries, from 1386 to 1795,

which accounts for certain mutual influences between the two nations. Adam Mickiewicz and more recently Czeslaw Milosz were among generations of writers who, in Simon Schama's words, "created a consolatory myth of a sylvan countryside that would endure uncontaminated whatever disasters befell the Polish state," a homeland that was celebrated as "Lithuania," albeit in Polish (24). Lithuanian forest landscapes were penned in the Polish language to become part of Polish, as well as Lithuanian, poetics. In a break with that tradition, *The Forest of Anykščiai* was written in Lithuanian and thus reclaimed language and place for Lithuanians themselves.

Baranauskas reconstructed the idea of the forest as a powerful, Lithuanian, national symbol. He connected this forest landscape to Lithuanian culture, religion and the historical political oppression of the Lithuanian people by a series of colonisers who exploited Lithuanian forest resources. In Nadas Rastenis' translation, *The Forest of Anykščiai* begins with a scene of exploitation:

Hills stripped of timber; dales shorn of leaves,
In your old beauty who now believes?
Yesteryear's grandeur how did you spend?
Where is the solemn murmur of wind,
When the white woodland's rustling leaves played,
And the tall pine trees in the wind swayed?
[...]
Lo, all has vanished! Look, on the plain
But a few stunted pine trees remain. (31)

The devastation of the forest is attributed to the "Czar's ranger" who, "Lied to their chiefs. When our men shed tears,/Guards caused a bloodshed boxing their ears" (Rastenis 55). The Anykščiai forest grove was nearly entirely logged. The forest could no longer exist as an ecosystem, but lived on as a poetic ecology in the cultural imagination. Baranauskas' re-invention of a Lithuanian forest Arcady was an instance of what Paul de Man might describe as nostalgia for an entity that is physically unavailable in the present (15). The Lithuanian forest was gone. Its ecological presence could not be brought back by remembrance, but it could be re-created as a powerful cultural landscape filtered through layers of myth and memory.

Landscape traditions rest in myth, memory and obsession (Schama 14). *The Forest of Anykščiai* is layered with mythology and folklore. It includes extensive reference to the story of the Queen of the Grass Snakes that describes the creation of several culturally significant tree species. In a forest setting, the Queen transforms herself and her children into trees "[a]nd all wear foliage green along with her" (Tempest 148). Baranauskas' incorporation of common folklore not only documents cultural history, but also alludes to an animist belief system. The Lithuanians once believed there was a residue of "living power" from the dead that did not leave the earth, but was reincarnated as flora and fauna (Gimbutas 191). Most often spirits would inhabit trees, women in linden and spruce, and men in oak, birch, and ash (Gimbutas 191). The relationship is not simply one of co-existing with the forest, but also of spiritual embodiment in the trees themselves. Through re-invention, the forest is poeticised as if it still exists: "[here all is

beauty, all fresh and green” (Rastenis 31). In the reproduction of a forest Arcady, Baranauskas appeals to animist sentiment.

Lithuanian writers in the poetic tradition of the nineteenth century portrayed an Arcadia inspired by a Nature-based mythology, and rural landscapes undisturbed by industrialisation (Silbarjoris 5). Lithuanian poetry became a celebration of landscape due to its roots in the ancient Lithuanian folk poetry tradition, *dainos* (Zdanys 59). Within the genre of European romanticism, *The Forest of Anykščiai* is also a lament. Baranauskas was alienated from the clearfelled forest, and exiled from its presence, he found solace in its memory. Baranauskas constructed a Lithuanian national identity through a human relationship with the forest:

Such was the forest Lithuania knew [...]
The trees all merging in one vista grand
As Lithuanian hearts in one homeland.
Our folk have always lived at one with trees
And know few closer friends than these. (Tempest 162)

One of the key roles of romanticism was to defend national cultures against the homogenous values of the Enlightenment (Hay, *Main Currents* 5). Beyond the environmental and cultural onslaught of colonisation, the “tragic romance of the Lithuanian forest” survived the brutal Russian suppression of a Lithuanian rebellion in 1863-64 as an artefact of cultural memory (Schama 62). Once embedded in text, memories of forest values were preserved in literature as the secret “heart of a Lithuanian national identity” (Schama 56). Writing from the position of the colonised, Baranauskas reclaims the forest as a Lithuanian national landscape.

Lithuanians have long since been stereotyped as lovers of Nature who find solace and succour from their surrounding environment, and who feel disjointed when they are apart from it (Kelertas 117). Beyond these initial assumptions, Violeta Kelertas argues that for Lithuanian people, Nature offers a “cultural alternative” that represents an inclination towards an animist, “pre-Christian sphere of possibilities” (117). A history of people’s interaction with forest ecosystems is central to Baranauskas’ idea of Lithuanian identity. In nineteenth-century Lithuania, there remained a strong connection with pre-Christian beliefs. The mythic representation of trees and the animist embodiment of souls within them are relics of what Violeta Kelertas labels “the age of forest culture” (108). The late step away from animism caused a certain amount of nostalgia and romantic reflection on pre-Christian times (Kelertas 108). However, despite his nostalgia Baranauskas describes the people of Anykščiai’s own exploitation of the forest: “[t]hey wept, did those who first a few trees felled,” but soon the forest was gone (Tempest 164). The “treeless generation” felt keenly the missing link in the symbiotic relationship between culture and environment, and learning “forest lore” from old songs, they regrew a forest on the site that was protected until Russian colonisation (Tempest 166).

Ah, but the sighs of the forest are lovely,
It rustles and surges, rushes and questions;

By midnight it reaches a stillness so silent
You can hear the break of a bud into blossom,
The holy word of each tree to its branches;
Watchful, the stars glow, mournful, the dew falls.
So peaceful the heart, it deadens the senses
With prayer that lifts the spirit towards heaven.
The light in the east at daybreak swells upward,
The head of each plant, dew-heavy, bends lower;
Into such silence, the forest awakens
And slowly the day starts its holy discourse.
(Jonaitis 63)



Photo 1: The Lithuanian Anykščiu Forest as National Myth and Intersection between Culture and Nature (Photo credits: Evan Hunter, June 2008)

In *The Forest of Anykščiai*, Nature is not an infinite resource, but a restricted, respected ecosystem, cared for in conjunction with Lithuanian culture. This is what makes the cleared forest such a devastating symbol of the treatment and oppression of Lithuania. In this Lithuanian eco-poetic context, Nature and culture are positioned in a reciprocal relationship, in a manner that acknowledges the depths of a peopled history and forest culture, both integral to national identity. It is a poetic ecology of forest. The trees of the homeland exist as poems, their leaves the letters in each verse, embedded with the knowledge that people are inextricably linked to the forest, sustained and defined by it as a place of myth and legend. In Lithuania, the loss of the forest was devastating, but it had the positive effect of re-affirming a Lithuanian identity predicated on a reverence for the forest embedded in text as a vision for an environmentally sustainable future.



Photo 2: The Regrown Lithuanian Anykščiu Forest (Photo credits: Evan Hunter, June 2008)

The Silencing of the Tasmanian Forest by the Reductive Lens of the Colonial Gaze

In stark contrast, since the invasion and settlement of Tasmania by Europeans, forest has typically been represented in text as a site of danger, hardship and suffering. More recently, Tasmanian forest has become a site of political conflict over large-scale logging. Tasmania, as with the rest of Australia, was founded on the premise of *terra nullius*, a colonial-era doctrine that implied that the land was “uninhabited” due to the nomadic peoples’ predominant lack of permanent villages and domesticated crop farming. This prevented national legal recognition of indigenous land rights up until the 1990s. From the colonial outlook, Australia had no social history before the arrival of the British, who brought their own history with them on ships (Griffiths 5). Roslynn D. Haynes argues that in Tasmania, the first English colonisers defined the land and its small population by reference to what was absent:

there was no history, no cultural context within which the land could be understood, no basis for interaction with it except in terms of hostility and brute conquest. (Haynes 195)

In 1860 a surveyor named James Calder wrote that Tasmania’s “past is a veritable blank and we look back into it only to discover that it has nothing to reveal” (Haynes 195).

Instead, the land was valued for its natural resources. By the middle of the nineteenth century, colonial forestry had become “a kind of intellectual and institutional plywood that glued together the separate veneers of Germanic silviculture, French *dirigisme*, and British imperialism” (Pyne 28). In Tasmania, forest was appreciated almost solely as a resource to support colonisation.

Yet, within this historical context, some aesthetic descriptions of Tasmanian forest landscapes can be found. The following examples observe a forest aesthetic, but nevertheless choose to represent Nature as silent and empty. The first is “Tasmanian Scenes” by settler Louisa Anne Meredith (1815-1895):

In deep, green, silent glens, silent, except the fall
Of tinkling streams that made a monotone most musical [...]
By groves of fragrant sassafrass, and myrtles dark and glossy,
'Neath bridges of great fallen trunks. (21)

Evident here is the rhetoric of silence, a trope that textually turns dynamic ecosystems to stone. Paradoxically enough, Meredith’s glen here comes across as silent and tinkling, monotone but musical. The trope is repeated even though the forest is clearly not still in the absolute sense. Christopher Manes argues that in the Western tradition, however, Nature simply “*is silent*” (15), as illustrated by Meredith who describes the sound of the

forest, but simultaneously also represents its very opposite. John Dunmore Lang formed his own description of the “silent” forest after visiting Tasmania in 1835:

With groves on either hand of ancient trees
Planted by Nature in the days of yore; [...]
But all is still as death! Nor voice of man
Is heard, nor forest warbler’s tuneful song.
It seems as if this beauteous world began
To be but yesterday; and th’ earth still young
And unpossessed [...]
[...] Wild solitude
Reigns undisturbed along the voiceless shore,
And every tree seems standing as it stood
Five thousand years ago. (196)

This forest landscape is not only silent, but also “voiceless.” It is sinisterly “still as death,” empty of human and non-human animals, owned by no one, static (Haynes 196). Silence, along with invocations of stillness and emptiness, writes life out of colonial poetry. Forest may be worthy of poetic inspiration, but in the coloniser’s refrain, it is defined as empty and undeveloped in a way that negates the presence of Tasmania’s first inhabitants.

Further evidence of silencing by the reductive lens of the colonial gaze manifests in “A Voice From Tasmania” (1846) by Edward Kemp. While supposedly offering the island a voice, Kemp dissuades reading the landscape as a palimpsest in favour of invoking a colonial imprint for the future:

The test of centuries o’er thee yet must sweep,
And their reflections in thy waters sleep,
Which, wooded to the brink, the gnarled roots lave,
Ere poesy perpetuates thy wave. (27)

The representation of Tasmanian forest as an untouched resource, by Kemp and Lang in particular, denies a history of the land and of the island’s people before European settlement. In effect, *terra nullius* is inscribed in these examples of colonial poetics. The language praises the land, but fails to recognise the dynamic presence of indigenous people, their effect on the landscape, and their relationship with place. In relation to *terra nullius*, the myth of indigenous extinction became problematic for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Long-standing reference to Truganini as the last Tasmanian Aborigine impeded the social acknowledgement of surviving indigenous Tasmanians until late into the twentieth century.

Echoes of Kemp and Lang’s colonial perspective reverberate in contemporary Australian poetry as well. Les Murray’s “Noonday Axeman” constructs a faux-Indigenous relationship to place. Murray appropriates ideas of ancestors and dreaming by using a rhetoric of silence and stillness that deletes the ecological presence of the forest and seeks to re-create an indigenous belief system to justify European presence:

Axe-fall, echo and silence. Noonday silence.
Two miles from here, it is the twentieth century:
cars on the bitumen, powerlines vaulting the farms.
Here, with my axe, I am chopping into the stillness. (2)

Murray's silent forest is only capable of producing a "knowledge that led my forebears/to drink and black rage and wordlessness" (3). The "same silence" reigns after the tree is cut, "[u]nhuman silence" as he chops "on into the stillness" (Murray 4). The poet suggests that there are always "some who could live in the presence/of silence," men "who would die if removed from these unpeopled places," to the opposition of the "noisy city" (Murray 4). The forest has a "[d]reaming silence" that evokes remembrance of the poet's ancestors: "axemen, dairymen, horse-breakers,/now confined in silence" before he sets "off home through the stillness" (Murray 5). Murray invokes an indigenous relationship with the land that reduces cultural agency for the purpose of his argument (Kinsella 155). In a reality unacknowledged by him, indigenous Australians have an oral tradition and belief system connected to place that stretches back tens of thousands of years before British colonisation.

Tasmanian author Margaret Scott considered an indigenous oral tradition of place to be perhaps one hundred times older than English writing about Tasmania (19). However, within the discourse of Tasmanian literature, colonial poetry that constructs the forest as silent, still and empty, perpetuates what A. L. McCann calls a "literature of extinction" in which the space left by a supposedly extinct race of people became a necessary assumption to fill the blank past as perceived by Australian settlers (51). The re-occurrence or continuation of these assumptions in poems such as "Noonday Axeman" is evidence of a link between colonial and post-colonial discourses in the currency of landscape and belonging (McCann 53). This is indeed the legacy of a literature of extinction. Tasmania's colonial destruction of Aboriginal people and culture mirrors the destruction of forests. In a colonial mentality, identity is drawn from conquest over the land and its people.

The Post-Colonial Re-awakening of the Sound and Breath of Organic Forest Landscapes

In the twentieth century, writing about Tasmania developed around a re-considered sense of place, making it possible to differentiate between colonial and post-colonial attitudes by the extent to which Nature is re-awakened as an organic ecology. An example of this is Philip Mead's "The Henty River, Western Tasmania." This poem articulates an expression of place that is at once conscious of its own language as well as seeking to acknowledge *terra nullius* and its effect on the literature of extinction:

The land we know is here, but has to be travelled back to.
Return. By this force of speech which is brutal, by maps
that are syntax and memory. This is part of the tillage

of knowledge; it is deep and significant and is the ownership
of Australia and of the land. (161)

Mead's implicit, yet subtle, recognition of land rights and a peopled history generates a new way of writing in which "notions of Anglo-Australian belonging—nation, landscape, the literature of the soil—are clearly identified as belonging to the toxic legacy of colonialism" (McCann 54). Self-reflexively, this poem sets a new course for inscribing a people's past upon place, a palimpsest that acknowledges the politics of colonisation and its shadow in the present.

"The Henty River, Western Tasmania" goes on to realise an interconnected and reciprocal relationship to place by articulating a return to country through the medium of water:

It will not stop; it is pouring through our hands, here
at the clear walls, where mind is nature. You will never
leave the earth. (162)

Movement proves inextricably linked to a connection with Nature. Nature is alive, dynamic, and cyclical. Never to leave the soil means to remain a part of the ecological system of the world. To be immersed in water, in earth, in forest, also signifies to enter a human history of the land, a history inextricably linked to a sense of place. This new sensitivity to the sound of Nature and to the history of people's interaction with their environment is increasingly influencing the Tasmanian conservation movement and its associated poetics. In a photographic essay, *Endangered: Tasmania's wild places* (2007), Pete Hay describes the "island at the end of the Earth":

[T]here are still blue skies and star-studded nights, clean air and water, fish in the sea, forests (with mammals in them), trees (with birds in them), mountains untamed, time and space, wonder, mystery, magic, spirit. ("Defending the Wild Lands" xiii).

It should be understood implicitly by all that forest is a home to animals, birds, insects, and plants, i.e. a habitat, but in countering the rhetoric of silence, Hay in fact issues an important and non-superfluous reminder. Hay's eloquence assumes diversity and dynamism in forest ecosystems, and finds inhabitants and a people's history implicit in the aesthetics of moss-covered branches and fern-strewn forest floors.

In 2004, the World Wildlife Fund published *Tarkine*, a book of photos from one of the world's largest tracts of temperate rainforest, situated in the north-west of Tasmania. Accompanying the photographs are poem snippets that guide the negotiation between forest and Nature, humans and the reality of photographic production. Facing a photo of a wombat are Claire Konkes' words "With eyes wide open, the myriad of living things appears beyond the simple definition of a forest having trees" (116). Rather than representing a rhetorically still forest, Konkes articulates movement: "Whatever our plans, the land is not static and continues to evolve" (108). Other poetry fragments trope on the idea of time as, for instance, in an excerpt from "Rivertalk" by Sue Moss, Julie Hunt and Angela Rockel:

The river talks in time and green.
Split sky. Rock iron. Tideline. Lifeline.
Waterland. The in between. (123)

In the post-colonial re-awakening of the sound and breath of organic Nature, water speaks. Likewise, in “The Myrtle Tree” by Carolyn Fisher, forest is written as affective:

Twice I've pushed my way
Under headdresses, through the parade,
To sit, my back against its trunk's hard back.
A green skin on the south side planted
A damp kiss between my shoulder blades,
And filtered by the canopy subtle lines
hung in the air like those that connect
You and me and us to a passage in time. (128)

The tree has a back, like the poet, skin and the capacity to kiss. Through these new sounds of forest and Nature, a connection is made between people and place, that is, between culture and the environment.

Tasmanian conservation movement poetics also re-inscribes an indigenous history of place, as shown by the caption alongside a photo of middens on the Tarkine coast is Anah Creet's line: “The overwhelming memory is that the land was not empty. The wind, the rocks, the sand all sing of its lost people” (80). This is evidence of a move from within the conservation movement to more clearly articulate people's place in Nature in a way that does not preclude the ecological presence of place, or negate past and present human and non-human life. In a post-colonial revival of poetic forest ecologies, it is crucial to consider the framework in which forest and other ecological subjects of conservation campaigns are expressed. Jonathan Bate avows that even though people articulate their existence through language, they are inextricably a part of their environment: “culture and environment are held together in a complex and delicate web” (23). It is through words that this web is negotiated and it is through words that injustices such as a literature of extinction and the deletion of a forest's ecological presence occur and are redressed.

Conclusion

Ecocritical consciousness shifts over time and space. Likewise, ecosystems in Nature are variable and allow for competitive interactions, and correspondingly, representations of Nature are characterised by mutation and competition in a way that reflects human perception of, and human interaction with natural environments. Through all this, Nature remains vital to the construction of national identity. In Lithuania and Tasmania, forest is a cultural landscape that informs both a sense of place and notions of identity. Baranauskas appropriated forest for a nationalist purpose to reclaim national identity. He

linked the re-emergent Lithuanian identity to a forest landscape, and in doing so re-evoked the memory of the logged forest to embolden the spirit of the nation. However, as an appropriation of forest culture, *The Forest of Anykščiai* remains imbued with Lithuanian mythology written into a complex ecosystem. In contrast, Tasmanian colonial poetry offers aesthetic, yet simplified, descriptions of Nature that appropriate forest on the basis of a colonial mentality that perceives it as an uninhabited resource. In post-colonial Tasmanian poetry, there has been a shift towards a more ecocentric approach to the forest, although this approach continues to construct a landscape that stabilises national and personal identities. Increasingly, as a means to remedy past injustices to indigenous people and exploitation of natural resources, green Tasmanian poetry constructs Nature as inextricably linked to human interaction. Current examples of forest poetry, particularly those related to the local conservation movement, project a vision for a more environmentally sustainable future onto the Tasmanian landscape.

Forest poetics has been variously constructed in the service of competing political agendas. Observing cross-cultural representations and appropriations of Nature can assist ecocriticism in addressing the problem of how textual expressions/constructions affect—and possibly distort—human perceptions of real environments. The aim now is to identify the tropes within discourse that prove detrimental to the conception of forest ecosystems as opposed to those that might help promote biodiversity in future poetic ecologies.

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