

John Dargavel

Anthropocene Days

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Readers of this journal will know of John Dargavel primarily as a historian of forests and forestry in Australia. In this his latest book he both broadens and shrinks his focus, writing about the state of the planet and his own life. It blends Dargavel's autobiography with essays on a scattering of topics, loosely linked to the notion of the Anthropocene. Every chapter is well written and enjoyable, but would be irritating to the sort of reader who is hurriedly hunting a take-home message before retrieving the kids from soccer practice. This is a book to be savoured when no deadlines are pressing.

Dargavel organises the book into 27 small chapters. With many pages given to chapter titles and more than two dozen to black and white images, the book runs to about 145 pages of text and the chapters average about five or six pages each. This list will give a sense of the range of subjects he addresses: wood, its uses and its beauty (Ch. 7); the joys of going to the cinema (Ch. 12); dust (Ch. 14); what Trotsky might have thought of solar panels (Ch. 15); Fernand Braudel's trilogy on capitalism and material life (Ch. 17); a visit to gardens in Cornwall (Ch. 20); the abundance of nails, bolts, screws etc. in his shed (Ch. 22); local parks where he likes to walk (Ch. 24); street demonstrations he has attended (Ch. 25). The book closes with a few excerpts from his COVID-19 pandemic diary.

Most but not all of these essays about quotidian concerns he relates to the Anthropocene somehow. In some cases the effort feels strained. But in others it provides interesting reflections on the ways that our daily lives connect to the recent transformations of the Earth. A Janus image at the end of each chapter reminds the reader of the contrast and connection between mundane routines and the fate of the planet. He does not attempt any extended reflection on the state of the Earth, feeling, perhaps, that there are enough of those already.

In general, I found the chapters that concerned Dargavel's upbringing and career in forestry more interesting than the essays featuring walks, gardens, sheds and so forth. He was born in London in 1932 and experienced the blitz and wartime privations as a boy. His family managed to walk around the countryside a good deal, which he credits with shaping his inclinations in life. Through a chance encounter at the close of his army service, Dargavel was inspired to become a forester. He was educated in forestry at Edinburgh, and shortly after graduation, in 1956, sailed to Australia to take a post as an assistant forester in the south-eastern reaches (Gippsland) of South Australia. There, he quickly understood, his Edinburgh training applied only loosely. He set about learning about the native flora and fauna that surrounded the *P. radiata* and *P. pinaster* plantations he was to help manage. In the following years

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he helped to establish eucalypt plantations, manage natural woodlands, fight bush fires, and everything else an Australian forester was expected to do in the 1950s and 1960s.

Eventually, curiosity and opportunity drew Dargavel back to formal study. He spent much of 1969–70 at the University of Georgia, where he found the U.S. forest products industry less efficient than expected and the burdens of racism more powerful than expected. Eventually, although just how is not clearly described, Canberra and the Australian National University became Dargavel's home for several years. There he developed his interest in (mainly) Australian forest history, in which he was a pioneer, while teaching several aspects of forestry.

He does not say much about his academic experience or the work he did in forest history. The book he co-wrote with the Austrian scholar Elisabeth Johann, *Science and Hope: A Forest History* (2013), which is an important study of forestry since the eighteenth century, is barely mentioned. Dargavel of course is free to write about his life just as he pleases, and his youth and career in the bush are indeed interesting reading. What readers of this journal are likely to associate most with Dargavel – his intellectual output in forest history, is, for better or for worse, not his subject.

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