

Growing Histories: the influence of the Bayeux Tapestry on Elizabeth Paterson's *Growing Home*

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Elizabeth Paterson, *Growing Home - the street trees of Canberra* (detail), 2008, end panel: papier-mâché, cardboard, inks and gloss medium. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Stuart Hay.

The Bayeux Tapestry is an epic visual narrative from the Middle Ages which depicts an important episode in English and French history. Its scenes cover a period from 1064 to the Norman Conquest of 1066, and record not just historical persons and their journeys, fights, feasts, deaths and triumphs, but also provide commentaries on the action and allegiances of the main characters.

Not technically a tapestry, the work is an embroidered scroll on linen, completed within a generation of the events it records. Whilst it is an extraordinary technical accomplishment, it is the way the tapestry holds narrative and time that I wish to focus on, leading into a discussion of the way the embroidery influenced Canberra artist Elizabeth Paterson in the making of her most recent work, *Growing Home—the street trees of Canberra*, which traces another epic battle – the 20th century greening of our arid capital city.

The first twenty-five panels of the Bayeux embroidery depict how an English earl, Harold of Wessex, betrays his promise to support William, Duke of Normandy, in William's claim for the English throne. Sea journeys and military campaigns, funerals and consecrations, public oaths of allegiance and private griefs are embroidered in a glorious sequence, seventy metres long, in exquisite artistic and historical detail. The visual structuring of climaxes, and the 'reading' of the text via an interplay between the main narrative and its border 'commentaries', make for a sophisticated, moving and delicate work of art.

The panel sequence around the death of King Edward has tremendous impact, and displays a technical mastery of the psychology of visual storytelling. Like a chapter heading,

the king's funeral is shown preceding his death. In the upper tapestry border, heraldic winged beasts seem to proclaim the nation's loss of its king, whilst below, a dog bays its grief and a choir follows the pallbearers, singing.

This public vision of the funeral and its significance is followed by the intimate, private scene of Harold's deathbed. As David Bernstein comments, 'It is the day on which Edward is both alive and dead'.¹ In this panel, an upper 'storey' shows the king alive, in the tender presence of his closest cohort, and Harold, whose hand he stretches out to touch (and thereby give accession). In the lower storey, the king's body is prepared for burial. In the next scene, two members of council offer the crown to Harold, one pointing backwards to Edward's death. Harold is then shown seated on the throne.

Throughout the tapestry, this forward-and-backward, up-down movement is common and complex. Pointing is a common tool; but so too are the implicit pointers in the border designs, varying from Aesopian animal figures to ghostly dreams and heraldic icons. In somewhat telescopic fashion, border images both amplify (via moral commentary) and contract (into emotional depth) the moment of observation.

At Harold's coronation, for example, two dogs eat their own tails, perhaps signalling how Harold creates his own downfall. The cheering crowd transforms into one with eyes fearfully upturned towards Halley's Comet (considered a bad omen) shown streaking across the heavens directly above his throne. The lower border depicts Harold's own ominous vision – spurred, one imagines, by guilt: a passage of 'ghost ships' (i.e. ships in outline) foretelling invasion.



TOP: Harold Enthroned CENTRE: Death of Edward. Detail images from a Victorian replica of the Bayeux Tapestry, 68.8 x 0.5m, approx 350kg in weight. Copyright Reading Museum Service (Reading Borough Council, United Kingdom). All rights reserved. ABOVE: Elizabeth Paterson, *cockiesdogwalker*, panel (detail) from *Growing Home*, 2008. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Brenton McGeachie.

Such meta-textual aspects of the tapestry – its internal, self-reflexive commentaries – give an added richness to our reading.² And as Bernstein points out, the intricacies of detail, such as at the borders, ‘slow us down’ within the forward drive of the narrative, providing a ‘vertical hold’ amidst the ‘horizontal push’.³ This is an art of both compression and elaboration, lending an inherent theatricality to the viewing experience.

This is where parallels with Elizabeth Paterson’s *Growing Home* begin. Paterson, an artist whose career began in theatre (as a performer, thence props-maker), has produced a visual document of the development of Canberra’s green spaces, from the plans of horticulturalist

Thomas Weston in the 1910s through the next 60 years.

Displayed last year at the Australian National Botanical Gardens between March and June, the work comprises a fourteen-metre scroll which wrapped around three walls of the Visitor’s Centre gallery. A papier-mâché *bas relief* based on the structure of the Bayeux Tapestry, it travels in time through a distinct narrative of events.

The battle, of course, is of a different nature than that represented in the Bayeux. And yet a battle it is: between man and climate, man and soil, man and fauna, and divided visions.

Intriguingly, Weston and the great architect of Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin, had strong differences of opinion as to how Canberra should be greened. It seems that results of Weston’s trial plantings showed he had a significant upper hand over Burley Griffin’s ideas, and his vision ‘won’.

The genesis of Paterson’s work, however, was not to eulogise Weston, or indeed record the triumph of man over landscape, as if ‘Canberra Man’, in the end, achieved a throne. For Paterson, the work has its genesis in a rather longer-seated and far more poignant question. Paterson has always wondered about her home-place, her place of birth. Whereas for many, ‘Canberra is controlled, quiet, empty, slightly boring’, she has long wondered what makes it distinctive – a place like no other.

Following the efforts of transforming the region’s vast limestone plains with gelignite and an army of men planting rootstock, the forefathers of Canberra were still left with a:

‘Great Emptiness characteristic of the Paddock. Indeed, the city is laid out incorporating paddocks within it.’ Whereas in other cities, ‘the Human Grand Narrative tends to be carried by its architecture, Canberra’s story remains its struggle with its landscape and the kinds of vegetation that survive best in it.’⁴

Inspired by a radio program in which the distinctive sounds of Greek music made her wonder what could carry a similarly unequivocal evocation of her hometown, her answer came quite readily: space, light, and the city’s distinctive combination of native and exotic plants. So formed the seed idea: a narrative frieze which also provides a historical document of the original vision to green a city that was inherently arid and brown.

Paterson found herself returning to something that caught her imagination as a child, travelling with her parents overseas. The Bayeux, she reflects, must have had a far deeper impact than she could write about at the time. The roots of influence obviously went deeper than her nine-year-old self could begin to record; the pages in her diary around that visit drew blank. Now, more than forty years later, she examined that influence as she worked on her scroll over a period of two years.

Some parallels are immediately evident. For one, *Growing Home* encompasses intimate detail within a broad historical sweep. Rabbits cluster; cockatoos and magpies convene; men build and plant; road structures change. Regional landmarks (Weston Park, Black Mountain) are easy to identify and tree genii – recording the subtle variations of colour and structure between the Brittle Gum, Red Box,



Elizabeth Paterson, *Growing Home - the street trees of Canberra*, 2008, 38(h) x 1400(w) x 10(d) cm, installation view, Australian National Botanic Gardens Visitor Centre: papier-mâché, cardboard, inks and gloss medium. Photograph by Brendan McGeachie.

Argyle Apple, Apple Box, Blakely's Red Gum, Yellow Box – are carefully illustrated, reminding one of the detail of armour, boats and tools in the Bayeux. Cars and machinery change in shape, and the passage of time is also marked by the progressive emptying of the streets as human presence thins. In the earlier years, packs of scruffy dogs trot amongst armies of men and plantings; in later decades, a sole dog-walker heads off past parked cars. For Canberrans especially, the work captures a poignant emotional reality that marks this as a city like few others.

To accommodate this level of detail within her medium Paterson had to devise new methods for working with papier-mâché. For one, flattening it to produce the background of the scroll ('it doesn't like it'), and secondly, discovering how to fill space with decorative line and applying tissue and glue for textural detail within broad sections of field and sky. Next, she devised a means of casting papier-mâché in order to achieve enough variation within the repetition of some hundreds of trees, birds, rabbits and working men to hold visual interest.

As with the Bayeux, one is aware of the binding effect of negative space, which serves to hold time between events and details. The background linen of the old tapestry allows the eye to travel in time whilst simultaneously giving pause for contemplation of the details. The compositional spaciousness of *Growing Home* achieves this as well, whilst also reflecting the sparseness so characteristic of this landscape.

Whereas the Bayeux has a restricted palette but brightness in its threads, coupled with a glistening richness and nobility in its cream-toned linen background appropriate to its heraldic themes, *Growing Home* restricts itself to paper browns (reminiscent of the 'brown packages tied with string' of the 1950s and '60s), bleached paddock greens, eucalypt greeny-greys. Easter egg foil splashes the final panel with deciduous autumnal colour – an aesthetic joy, like a release of streamers from the hands of a child, as well as the artist's quiet comment on the relationship between indigenous and introduced vegetation.

As one's eye scans the length of scroll, there is a delicate beauty to its rhythms, a delight in patterning which parallels one of the great pleasures of viewing the medieval tapestry. Abstracted contours swerve across several panels; decorative cornices provide thematic detail, as do the textures of fields and nursery plantings, the rhythms of tree trunks punching the air in their exuberance, the end-note of the coloured foils, and the ornate, curled scroll-work which tail-ends the whole, rendering it fantastical. This is a tall tale,

held to account with historical detail. The document of effort and industry is matched with an overarching goal of aesthetic pleasure. Of such stuff are we (and our histories) made.

My favourite moment is where a tiny portrait bust of Weston sits eye to eye with a rabbit. Human endeavour almost meets its match. It is a sign of exquisite self-reflexivity which invites further development wherever Paterson is next drawn to explore.

History itself is a character embodied in the Bayeux, as strong as any individual: in *Growing Home*, the major protagonist is the land, and what happens to it as human endeavour bounces off it. It is the work's ultimate hero.

Notes

1. David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1984, p. 245.
2. Bernstein rather nicely calls this a 'visual polyphony', in Bernstein, 1984: p. 124.
3. Bernstein, 1984: p. 87.
4. Conversation with the artist, Canberra, April 2008.
5. Bernstein, 1984: p. 245.

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