Eleanor Catton
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Selling Out in the High Country

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Among the many pleasures of reading Eleanor Catton's idiosyncratic fiction is her sheer inventiveness, the sense that she likes to set herself difficult or even improbable writing challenges. Her works hover on the boundaries of established genres—coming of age in her first novel *The Rehearsal* (2008), crime fiction in *The Luminaries* (2013)—while refusing to abide by genre conventions. *The Rehearsal* could be seen as an anti-creative work: set in a performing arts school, the novel presents a caustic take on training in creative arts as ego-eviscerating initiation. *The Luminaries* arbitrarily (for many readers) fuses the extrinsic numerical patterns of Western astrology with a character-based historical murder mystery cum neo-Victorian sensation novel.

Catton's most recent novel, *Birnam Wood,* offers another kind of formal conundrum. It is a slow-burning environmental thriller which morphs from dilatory classical realist narration into action-based political intrigue complete with an odious, masterful villain. *Birnam Wood* is also Catton's most patently satirical work, and though her primary targets are the megalomaniacal, predatory, planet-destroying exponents of global capital, she takes a few digs at the naïveté of New Zealand's activist left along the way. Politically, she puts into play the question as to what happens

to environmental balance and social connections to the land when it is sold to the highest overseas bidder, setting the stage for conflicts between collectivist and private uses of the land; between the sell-out baby-boomer generation and their adult children; between local communities and global capital; between survival of the planet and survival of the rich. It all sounds like it should be a bit of a muddle, but Catton pulls it off with flair and wit.

Birnam Wood is an underground collective which plants and cultivates organic plots on suburban land, making productive use of all the 'fertile land going begging'. Though much of the planting is arranged by agreement, some of it occurs clandestinely, by trespassing on underused and forgotten tracts of land. Its founder, 29-year-old horticulturalist Mira Bunting, has no qualms in trespass, believing the 'entire concept of land ownership' to be 'arbitrary and absurdly prejudicial . . . when divorced from use or habitation', and that 'landowners had committed theft on a far greater scale, merely by being landowners'.[1] However, Birnam Wood faces a fundamental problem: its revenue model is plainly unworkable. Half of the yield of every crop is given to the hosts, and the rest goes to the members. Driven by her deep sense of purpose but with little attention to her personal financial future, Mira has been funding the enterprise by racking up some one-hundred-thousand dollars in student loans.

The arduousness of the work, for zero monetary reward, causes strain among the key players in the collective. Shelley Noakes, Mira's hitherto 'predictable sidekick', wants out from all of the pressures of Birnam Wood: the 'suffocating moral censure, the pretended fellow feeling, the constant obligatory thrift'.[2] But Shelley is also Mira's close friend and flatmate, so she is putting off the difficult conversation that would extricate her from Mira's visionary project. Shelley's attachments prove to be even more fickle, however. When Tony, another collective member and one-time lover of Mira, returns from overseas, Shelley concocts a plan to weaponise him sexually by seducing him, and so wedge herself away from Mira, who still

1 Eleanor Catton, *Birnam Wood* (Wellington: Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2023), 19, 22.

2 Catton, *Birnam Wood*, 17, 16,

holds feelings for Tony.

The central conflict in the novel arises when Mira, seeking opportunities to expand Birnam Wood's operations, comes under the influence of American Robert Lemoine—'a serial entrepreneur, a venture capitalist, and, apparently, a billionaire'. When a massive slip closed the gorge road in the fictional rural town of Thorndike and brought practically all business in the area to a standstill, a former sheep station that had been planned for subdivision was quietly withdrawn from public sale. Mira sees an opportunity to use apparently vacant farm land to plant crops at scale. While scoping the property on foot, she is accosted by Lemoine, who has purchased it privately from the recently knighted Sir Owen Darvish and his wife Lady Jill. Officially, Lemoine is 'angling for citizenship' under New Zealand's golden visa investor category so that he can set up a doomsday bunker. As camouflage, he self-ironically presents himself as a 'billionaire looking for a bolt hole', 'a status-symbol survivalist fudging his bets against any number of potential global catastrophes that he himself was doing nothing to prevent'.[3] In fact, Lemoine has a far more exploitative and illicit plan in action; and when he decides, on a whim, to direct some of his investment dollars toward Birnam Wood as a start-up, the hapless young Kiwis are drawn into his nasty plans.

As this summary suggests, many of the plot elements strain credulity; but plausible plot lines are hardly the point of Catton's work. Instead, particularly in the expansive exposition occupying the first half of the novel, she carries her reader along with masterful writing: detailed, insightful character portrayals, intense explorations of interior states, epigrammatic wisdom, exquisitely wrought sentences. Catton embeds each character within a family context, evidencing the ambivalent gifts of their parents as members of the baby-boomer generation—that 'despised cohort of hoarders and plunderers'. These intergenerational dynamics both generate and constrain the political commitments of their adult children. The central Birnam Wood trio are shown to be emotionally vulnerable through their formative family experiences, each labouring under a need

3 Catton, *Birnam Wood*, 74, 219, 79.

to prove themselves that draws them into the orbit of the smooth-talking, ruthless American. The daughter of divorced parents who frankly despised each other, Mira is engaged and aroused by Lemoine's goading. He is the 'sparring partner' that she needs to confirm her convictions: 'Like all self-mythologising rebels, Mira preferred enemies to rivals, and often turned her rivals into enemies, the better to disdain them as secret agents of the status quo'. Shelley's political convictions are much less secure; she has internalised her recruitment consultant mother's dismissal of Birnam Wood as 'a frankly illegal scheme of trespassing and botanical vandalism', and her hesitations make her vulnerable to Lemoine's easy charms.[4]

It is only Tony who outrightly and vehemently opposes the proposal that the collective should take up Lemoine's offer of venture capital to support their expansion, though he may be right for the wrong reasons. Tony is the kind of Pākehā activist who likes to find things he can say no to: 'His intellect was his liberty, and he knew no greater provocation than to have his vocabulary or his style of rhetoric policed'. Yet this moralising pugnaciousness stems from pools of humiliation and self-doubt. Internally, he is still battling his overbearing father, whose image inflects his thought patterns and politics (parents are rarely wholly benign figures in Catton's fiction, from what I can tell). Tony is also chafing against his designation within leftist circles as a privileged white male, a privilege that is only further underscored when he receives a large inheritance from his grandfather. Despite the basic truth of this designation, '[Tony] could not accept a worldview whose terms he was not allowed to question, and he resented the caricature of power and entitlement that he was forever being told that he embodied automatically and absolutely, no matter what his intentions were, and no matter what he felt or thought, or even did'. These factors seem to make him even more determined to prove his *bona fides* as a warrior for social justice. In a long set-piece, where Catton unleashes her most unrestrained rhetoric, Tony rails against neoliberalism and urges members of the collective not to capitulate to the seductions of the (so-called) free market. But he is out of step with the zeitgeist. In the 'perpetually

4 Catton, *Birnam Wood*, 13, 20, 8, 13.

unsettled' post-2016 climate, activism had become 'urgent again', only to be derailed and diluted by structural affinities with start-up culture. Even Shelley's sceptical mother is impressed: Birnam Wood was 'organic, it was local; it was a bit like Uber; it was a bit like AirBnB'.[5] Tony's arguments fail to sway the group, who vote to accept Lemoine's Faustian bargain.

In the second half of the novel the action intensifies. Birnam Wood members gather at the farm to set about their mahi, breaking ground and planting crops. Having alienated himself from the rest of the collective, Tony also travels to the land, hoping for a scoop that will secure his credentials as an aspiring journalist. Certain that Lemoine's purchase of the farm is a cover, he heads into the national park bush that skirts the farm to scope the American's operations. The final scenes escalate rapidly and cinematically, with quick-fire action (literally—a gun is involved), characters reappearing conveniently to advance plot points, and a final showdown which feels over all too soon. To use terms derived from screenwriting, the careful planting of story details in the first two-thirds of the novel is not matched by an equally satisfying payoff. That said—and keeping with the scriptwriting theme—*Birnam Wood* will make for a great screen adaptation in the right hands.

As suggested by the "man alone" scenario of Tony striking out into the bush, Catton alludes self-consciously but loosely to established tropes of settler nationalist culture. As a Pākehā reader, I have a particular interest and identity stake in canonical lines of settler literary tradition—and in seeing these inheritances renovated and interrogated to be more relevant for today's urgent political challenges. Catton's man alone is disaffected, self-divided, and self-isolating, not an inarticulate drifter but a journalist whose voice is stymied even as he finally finds something to write about other than himself. He is a man who is stonewalled, not by the forces of a monolithic society, but by a rapacious individual allowed to enter the country because the government is prepared to pander to the vanity projects of the global rich.

A more fully developed and, I think, potentially more promising

5 Catton, *Birnam Wood*, 31, 32, 16.

intervention lies in the direction of Catton's revision of the trope of the South Island myth. The high country has occupied a privileged place in settler aesthetic traditions, serving as a particularly concentrated literal and figurative landscape for various projections of the settler 'mission' since the 19th century. At an influential phase of settler cultural nationalism (at the risk of massive oversimplification), the high country was represented through two apparently opposite, yet functionally aligned, forms of 'colonial specularity'.[6] On the one hand, under the guise of a poetic that was concrete and austere, the high country was figured in influential works by Charles Brasch, Allen Curnow, and others, as remote and unpeopled. Once deanimated and dehistoricised in this way, the land could implicitly be seen as a *terra nullius* that 'fallaciously invites conquest', awaiting entry into history.[7] On the other hand, the high country was seen as scarred by the ecological devastations of settler agriculture, sometimes in works by the same poets. Yet the two apparently contrary rhetorics converge around the idea that the dual mission of settler cultural nationalism is to 'civilize the landscape, but also civilize one's fellow-civilizers'—hence the persistent images of failure and gloom in settler literary modernism, intended to provoke urgency toward a settler habitation that is spiritually, expressively, and environmentally more attuned with the land.[8]

There's been a lot going on at the farm since the heyday of settler cultural nationalism. *Birnam Wood* updates 'colonial specularity' to 'neocolonial specularity', linking a representational régime to speculative venture capital and foregrounding the technologies of seeing that enable

6 John Newton, 'Colonialism above the Snowline: Baughan, Ruskin and the South Island Myth', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 34, no. 2 (1999), 85.

7 Newton, 'Colonialism above the Snowline', 92.

8 Newton, 'Colonialism above the Snowline', 92. The South Island myth discounted centuries of Māori storying of the high country and movement to and through it, since re-affirmed by works such as Nic Low's *Uprising: Walking the Southern Alps of New Zealand* (Melbourne: Text, 2021), where he retraces traditional Ngāi Tahu alpine passages. Nonetheless, traces of the myth remain—for example, in Grahame Sydney, Brian Turner, and Owen Marshall's *Timeless Land* (Dunedin: Longacre Press, 1995), where the repeated images of deserted rail sheds and muster huts in Sydney's paintings suggest that settlement has already been and gone, and left only a few elegiac traces.

new forms of environmental degradation. No longer portrayed as remote, the high country is instead shown to be highly surveyed, and surveilled. It is the master surveillance exponent Lemoine who is most associated with the view from above, whether by drone, plane, or radiometric survey. In this regard, Mira's first act of bad faith occurs when she views the land in Thorndike through a realtor website: parcelled, commodified, privatised. This optic betrays Mira's usual grounded view; she doesn't even have a camera that works properly, let alone a surveillance system. Instead, her knowledge is of, not above, the earth:

> In a garden, expertise was personal and anecdotal—it was allegorical—it was ancient—it had been handed down; one felt that gardeners across the generations were united in a kind of guild, and that every counsel had the quality of wisdom, gentle, patient and holistic—and yet unwavering, for there was no quarrelling with the laws and tendencies of nature, no room for judgment, no dispute: the proof lay only in the plants themselves, and in the soil, and in the air, and in the harvest.[9]

Lemoine's view, by contrast, is always instrumental, abstracting land into territory for exploitation—whether to scope for extractive value, establish zones of security and surveillance, or simply to relish the kind of in-flight experience that only a billion dollars can buy. While piloting his private plane, '[Lemoine] achieved, at altitude, a profound sense of his own proportion, of the sheer scale of everything he could be, everything he had been, everything he was'.[10] It is this seemingly superhuman, Peter Thiel-like, American who has become the new usurper of the view and who would dislodge, psychologically as well as territorially, the Pākehā settlers who, in their own self-perception at least, are working hard to resist exactly the self-serving, exploitative, overweening arrogance that Lemoine stands for.

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9 Catton, *Birnam Wood*, 53.

10 Catton, *Birnam Wood*, 78.

Per the conventions of the thriller genre, the final showdown pitches the forces of good against evil, but the impact of the more searching, sharply observed social commentary in the first half of the novel is not wholly undermined. *Guardian* reviewer Kevin Power expressed disappointment in the polarised banality of the ending, gently disparaging it as 'billionaires bad! Leftwing radicals good, if sometimes misguided and hapless!'[11] While villains can serve to galvanise indignation (and can even be quite fun in a satirical vein), they can also shut down more nuanced questions of social agency. I have to admit that I quickly forgot the flurry of plot in the narrative's final stages. Yet the dilemmas of political commitment and impact that are provoked in the first part of *Birnam Wood* have stayed with me well past the final page. Much of the novel is highly discursive, in the sense that there is some point in contention on pretty much every page. Characters tussle verbally with each other, or debate matters within their own heads, voicing, thinking, or embodying points of view that you're unlikely to feel neutral about. Catton is brilliant in the writerly craft of representing consciousness in a fluid, adept style; so fluid, at times, that it can be difficult to pin down narratorial tone.

The satirical elements are uneven, too. I can enjoy Lemoine's mischievous ridicule of a fatuous talk-show host and his vacuous wife, especially when their real-life counterparts can pretty easily be identified. But I'm not so sure that the provision of a golden visa, or the schemes of doomsday preppers, are as self-evidently or unremittingly unconscionable as Catton seems to have us assume.[12] I appreciate the way in which *Birnam Wood* centrally acknowledges the influence of global capital on New Zealand, departing

11 Kevin Power, '*Birnam Wood* by Eleanor Catton Review – Hippies v Billionaires', *The Guardian,* 3 March 2023.

12 For a succinct debate on the pros and cons of investor visas in the context of the global 'citizenship trade', the LSE Events podcast episode 'The Golden Passport: Global Mobility for Millionaires' (24 October 2023) features a panel discussion of Kristin Surak's book of the same title. On doomsday preppers, I note Tom Doig's words when he accepted a CLNZ/NZSA award to undertake research on this group in New Zealand: prepping is a 'sincere, complicated response to taking an unflinching look at the threats to society, whenua and taiao in our collective future'. CLNZ press release, 6 October 2023.

from an insularity that shapes much settler fiction. I also see plenty of reasons to be suspicious of American influence in New Zealand politics, especially as ACT and New Zealand First—the supposedly minor players in the current coalition government—are hauling politics toward the right in matters such as gun control, tino rangatiratanga, and trans rights. Yet I also can't help feeling that the invitation offered by *Birnam Wood* to cheer on middle-class Pākehā as doughty but inept defenders of national values against American predation stirs new ripples of settler nationalism.

Kevin Power suggests that *Birnam Wood* dramatises the 'deadlocks of our contemporary politics', 'the locked social geology that prevents meaningful action on climate change'.[13] This comment rings true, to the extent that Catton anatomises a leftist mindset that is unworldly, paralysed by self-reflexivity, compromised and infantilised by the complacent boomer generation, unable to anticipate the brazen, massively destructive deviousness of the anti-democratic super-rich. These are specifically Pākehā quandries, though. Catton foregrounds the fact that the Birnam Wood collective has no Māori members. A moment that could ring uncomfortably true for more than a few well-meaning left-leaning Pākehā is the debate between Mira and Shelley as to whether Birnam Wood should have a Māori name, when there are no Māori associated with the group who might give cultural advice. Like many of the debates in the novel, it goes nowhere in particular. By way of contrast, Te Pati Māori's recent call for a National Māori Action Day in protest against the coalition government's 'assault on tangata whenua' drew thousands of protestors to the streets. Catton's novel is capacious, elaborate, provocative, totally enjoyable—and also perhaps at some remove from the most generative energies for progressive politics in New Zealand.

13 Power, '*Birnam Wood* by Eleanor Catton Review'.