

Footloose and fancy free

As our over-developed planet grinds towards gridlock, the spirit of the vanishing nomad is inspiring.

ENVIRONMENT

Quarterly Essay 24: No Fixed Address – Nomads and the Fate of the Planet

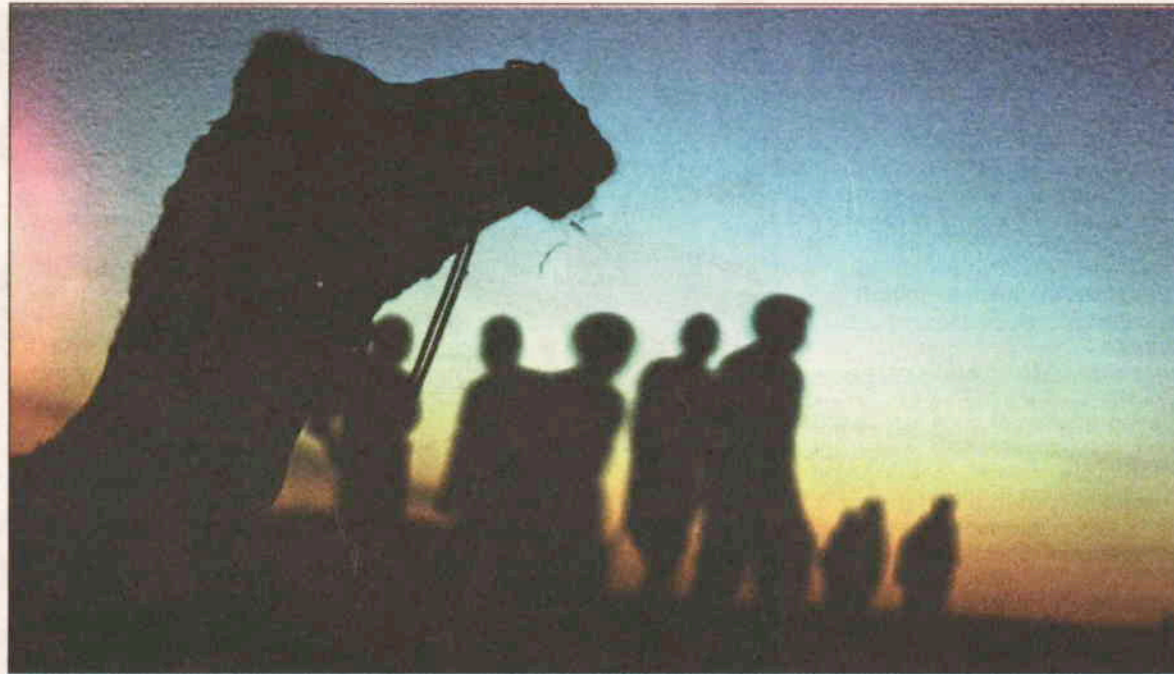
By Robyn Davidson
Black Inc., 89pp, \$14.95
Reviewed by Claire Scobie

ROBYN DAVIDSON HAS travelled and lived with nomads for more than three decades. From the dusty plains of Gujarat to the harsh Tibetan plateau, this Queensland-born writer has documented these resilient people who, she believes, value knowledge over wealth and walk lightly on the earth.

Her own yen to wander began in 1977 when, as a young woman, she embarked on a solo journey, accompanied by camels, across central Australia, recorded in the award-winning memoir, *Tracks*.

Now preparing a book on nomadism, the subject of this essay, Davidson believes lessons can be learned from these cultures whose survival is threatened. Free from the attachments that encumber sedentary people, nomads display "humanistic virtues". She does not have answers to the current "ecological woes" but she presents "ground for reflection".

For herself, Davidson relishes the simple life. She owns 160 hectares of regrowth native oak forest in



Romantic vision ... the Rabari tribe of Gujarat.

Photo: John McConnico

India with impoverished peasants as neighbours and refuses to let them chop down her wood for fires. At first they viewed her as an impediment, but "when water began to flow back into their springs, the policy was accepted".

Using the Genesis allegory of Cain and Abel, Davidson launches into a brief history of the rise of agriculture and civilisation. Abel is the free man of the plains, Cain is the settled farmer with rotten teeth. As the domestic replaces the wild,

Cain's people trade "immersion in nature for domination of it"; stealing, warfare and alcoholism follow.

Davidson takes this somewhat reductive argument further in her description of indigenous Australia and the Dreaming. Repeatedly referring to "traditionally oriented Aboriginal people", without specifying who these people are, she argues that when Aborigines move away from their country it becomes "orphaned". This conjures up the romantic – and often anthropologi-

cal – image of a noble savage living on the prairie who loses his identity when he ceases to wander.

Following such a view implies that any Aborigine living in a non-traditional urban area – now the majority – no longer has a Dreaming. But surely, the Dreaming cannot exist without the people, wherever they are: it is not defined by place or primitiveness.

Davidson's literary excursion, like its subject, follows a meandering course. There are poetic peaks – the

Tibetan hills are vividly captured "like tawny velvet thrown over bones" – and valleys of vernacular: "we have managed in just 200 years to bugger up our country".

She argues that in Tibet the Chinese Government blames the nomads' pastoral way of life for environmental disasters – sandstorms and the flooding of the Yangtze River – but the reasons are more complex. Beijing acknowledges, for example, that decades of deforestation in Tibet were the primary cause of floods.

I enjoyed her account of the gruelling months she spent with the Rabari pastoral nomads in Gujarat, punching and cursing the goats that crowded around her as she tried to sleep at night. However, her tendency to romanticise diminishes her unique insight into these cultures. The prose is not anchored: there are scant reference to dates, names of places or people and a surfeit of generalities.

Davidson ends with a fascinating vignette on new forms of nomadism – from refugees to business executives – and the "virtual nomad", uprooted from place but "plugged into a computer terminal". The less connected we are, she believes, the more we are prone "to give way to despair". It is a reality this free-spirited wanderer mourns.

Claire Scobie is the author of *Last Seen in Lhasa*.

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