Landprints

Reflections on place and landscape

George Seddon

Foreword by Sir Gustav Nossal

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Foreword

by G. J. V. Nossal

C. P. Snow's two-culture gap keeps popping up in all sorts of new ways. The chasm narrowed substantially when dramatic events such as the taming of DNA and the microelectronic revolution caused intellectuals within the humanities to focus more on science and technology. But fresh cracks originate from epicentres of incomprehension (structuralism, for example, or the arcane jargon of the new biology); they spread and threaten. If we value true learning, if we wish to continue humanity's age-old, unrequitable quest for seamless knowledge and understanding, we need fissure-menders, voices which challenge but unify.

George Seddon may well be Australia's prime example of this rare species. Educated initially in English, he was sufficiently fascinated by science to obtain a doctorate in Geology. His university career has seen him within departments as diverse as English, Philosophy, Geology, History and Philosophy of Science, and Environmental Studies. His practical work has been in landscape planning, urban design and even oil exploration. He is sought all over the world as a keynote lecturer on many topics. Throughout the last quarter-century or more, he has been a prolific writer. *Landprints* is a synthesis of this scholarship. The book resists classification, for it is much more than a collection of essays. Specialised technologies lessen the scope for general debate. 'As the tools of analysis have become sharper, the range of discourse has shrunk, and has tended to become one of professional set pieces.' So Seddon sets out to widen discourse, and the array of diverse past works is grouped, linked, revised and enlivened by introductions and conclusions. Despite the 'linearity of language', Seddon achieves a 'polyphonic account', a fugue for six voices, as his eclectic yet disciplined reading illuminates his search for understanding of language and landscape.

What is *Landprints*? It is history; it is artistic and literary criticism; it is natural history and philosophy. It reveals many principles of landscape architecture, conservation, geology and ecology while avoiding the dryness of most textbooks. It is above all a search for general perspectives from particular examples. It is a valiant attempt to confront some of the key paradoxes of the day: internationalism, liberating but homogenising; regionalism, capable of cementing a sense of place, but possibly parochial and restricting – 'McDonald's setting up shop in China on the one hand, the horrors of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia on the other'. Seddon eschews simplistic solutions. Loyalty and commitment, regional culture, neighbours and neighbourhood must somehow be made to co-exist with academic culture, seen as international, 'the enemy of the parochial; its habitual mode is ironic detachment'. As regards the landscape, both Arcadian and Utopian visions represent oversimplifications. Seddon recognises the place of the human in the landscape, revels in the interplay between natural forms and human creations. The sweep of a freeway,

a Robin Boyd circular building faithfully reflecting 'bare rounded hill forms behind and around it', a church spire with the backdrop of the Blue Mountains, even human figures in a landscape painting can enhance rather than destroy the harmony of the scene. Indeed, the same rainforest can seem luminous and paradisal to Jeannie Baker but penitential, dark and menacing to Judith Wright. We must understand such ambiguities and indeed the complexities of deep human attitudes if we are to approach conservation issues intelligently.

'We should be searching first for clarity', and this Seddon does consistently, chiding us for our ready espousal of clichés and oversimplifications. Our landscape is 'vast', 'harsh', 'hostile' and 'unforgiving'. Vast in comparison with a Europe which embraces Russia? Harsh, hostile and unforgiving for the Aborigines? Seddon's clarity in and respect for language is punctuated by some stunningly original – indeed improbable – images. Thus: 'Can you imagine the Parthenon getting planning approval today?'; 'we are not only "future eaters"; we also devour the past, a kind of tourist destination'; or 'three persistent dreams of place; the first, of the Mediterranean, the second, of coral islands in the Pacific, and the third, of tropical jungle'. The rightness of each thought is immediately illustrated by examples, usually with a quite extraordinary juxtaposition of ideas and not a little whimsy.

Seddon displays a courageous balance in his promotion of environmental concern. Already in 1972 he saw the flaws of extremism, such as the bleak predictions of the Club of Rome. Nevertheless, he avows that it is silly to divorce emotion from the environmental debate. What's wrong with being passionate about an important subject? But emotion should co-exist with reason. Above all, we must avoid 'contempt for and alienation from Western society'. My favourite sentence in the book: 'It is counterproductive to destroy the faith of the young in their own society'. How often do we hear this from a conservationist?

George Seddon is, in the end, passionately and quintessentially Australian. 'Australia is inside our heads, your Australia in yours, my Australia in mine'.

The analysis of Australia's ecological fragility, the description of continuing threats to flora and fauna, avoid the shrillness of many authors and somehow gain strength from that. The lampooning of Australian attitudes and stereotypes is softened by a youthful enthusiasm, a zestful optimism which illuminates the whole work.

As I pen these lines, Australia is facing a wide-ranging inquiry into tertiary education. Among other things, the inquiry will seek to define the true purpose of universities, the distinction and balance between education and training. I wish every member of that panel could read *Landprints*. I will end with a line which George Seddon applied to John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature* in 1974. The publication of *Landprints* is a major intellectual event.

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One of the privileges of the academic life is the stimulus of ideas from friends and colleagues, not, of course, all themselves academics, but without whom the life of the mind would be hard indeed. So I thank many unnamed people and name two: Tom Griffiths, who encouraged me to think (on and off) that such a collection might be worth assembling; and Basil Balme, who read it in draft. I owe much to Cambridge University Press, especially to Phillipa McGuinness and Jane Farago, and to Sally Nicholls and Ron Hampton. They have given me a hitherto undreamed of sense of the cultural centrality of Oakleigh.

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For Joan and Norman Wettenhall

Prelude: Dual allegiances

A Frenchman looks at 'les Australiens'

In the early seventeenth century, a Frenchman, Jacques Sadeur, spent 35 years in Australia (or rather, *la terre Australe*). When he eventually got back to Europe, he wrote a book about it, first published in Geneva in 1676.

He describes our national character rather well – for example, one Australian tells him that: 'we make a profession of being all equal, our glory consists in being all alike; all the difference that there is, is only in divers exercises to which we apply ourselves' (presumably he is thinking of rugby versus soccer versus Australian Rules football).

The book contains '*les coutumes et les moeurs des Australiens*' – our customs, our studies, the special animals of the country and so on. There are only four large animals, and none of them dangerous, there are no venomous serpents, there are no troublesome insects, and in particular, specially mentioned, there are no flies. There is a magnificent range of mountains along the south coast, much higher than the Pyrenees, and some broad rivers. It snows occasionally in the south, but not much, and people go around without clothes all the year, since it is never excessively hot nor excessively cold. We live on fruit that ripens the year round. Our houses have exquisite floors and walls of translucent stone (like alabaster, but crystalline-hard and beautifully veined). We are brave warriors, but generally peaceful. Everyone seems to love everyone else, but no one person in particular, and it is not clear how children come into being, since it is a crime to discuss the procreative act. 'Men' as well as 'women' are able to suckle infants, so gender roles are blurred (see colour illustration following p. 78). And the countryside everywhere is a garden.

Things have changed a bit since the early seventeenth century. Needless to say, both the story and its narrator are an invention, an imaginary voyage in the tradition of Swift and many others, and, like most of the imaginary voyages, it is also a Utopian satire on the contemporary world. The Australians are a much better lot than the corrupt and violent society the author saw around him in seventeenth-century Europe. He does not make his Australians quite perfect, however: one way to achieve a satirical contrast is simply to make them very different in some supposedly basic aspect of human behaviour so that we reflect that what we take to be basic may be little more than arbitrary custom. Samuel Butler does this two centuries later in *Erewhon*, set in an imaginary New Zealand, where criminals are sent to hospitals, and the sick to prison.

The real author is not Jacques Sadeur, but Gabriel de Foigny, who was born in 1630 in a small village in the Ardennes. He received a good education, entered a monastery and became a preacher, but was soon unfrocked for unfrocking too freely among the girls of the neighbouring village. France became too hot for him, so in 1666 he went to Geneva, forswore the Catholic faith, and converted to the

puritanical creed of Calvin. He soon got into trouble again, adding drunkenness to licentious behaviour. His book was also to get him into trouble in Switzerland, and eventually he went back to France, where he died in 1692.

I had come across de Foigny's book from occasional quotations and references in other works, but I had never read it through until I became aware of an exhibition in Melbourne by a young Australian-Italian painter, Julia Ciccarone, who has illustrated Sadeur's text; her work, and the excellent catalogue that goes with it, are based on an English translation published in 1693 (with the fictitious author undergoing a name-change from Jacques to James). This translation is based on a second edition in French, published in Paris in 1692, somewhat expurgated from the 1676 edition that so shocked the good folk of Geneva.

Some of de Foigny's detail is standard Utopian, some highly original. We Australians are born both good and free, so we need a formal government no more than we need a formal religion. We meet to discuss the affairs of the community, but we have no written laws and no rulers. There is no private property, and the family is no threat to the unity of the community, because it does not exist. These Utopian ideals were tried by a group of Australians in the last century in Paraguay, and by the Israelis on their kibbutzim.

The sexual behaviour of the Australians is one of the highly original features, for we are all hermaphrodites. Sexual relations except in the service of reproduction are regarded with horror and reproduction itself is something of a mystery, not to be discussed, although every being is expected to produce one child. Presumably these attitudes to sex are a parody of the extreme puritanism of Calvinist Geneva. In other respects, however, the Australians are very open about their bodies. Everyone goes around naked. Sadeur discusses this with an Australian, pointing out that Europeans are quite shocked to see a person naked. He alleges that the reasons for the European attitudes are 'modesty, the rigour of the season and custom'. Sadeur told the Australian:

> there were some countries amongst the Europeans, where the cold was so insupportable to the body, which was more delicate than that of the Australians, and that there were some that even died upon it, and that it was impossible to subsist without clothes: I told him that the weakness of the nature of either sex was such that there was no looking upon one that was naked without blushing and shame, and without being sensible of such emotions as modesty obliged me to pass over in silence. (de Foigny, 1693, p. 74)

But his Australian interlocutor was not impressed by these arguments:

> Is not this to father upon all the world what is contrary to Nature? We are born naked, and we can't be covered without believing that it is shameful to be seen as we are: but as to what thou sayest concerning the rigour of the season, I can't . . . give any credit to it; for if this country is so insupportable, what is it that obliges him that knows what reason is, to make it his country? (de Foigny, 1693, p. 75)

This seems to catch the authentic Australian voice as heard today in England or France: 'if the climate is that bad, why stay there?'

There is a lack of differentiation between the parts of de Foigny's Australia that reads like a good guess:

> What is more surprising in the Australian Dominion, is that [apart from the great fringing range along the south coast, from which the rivers run, guided by brilliant projects of irrigation engineering] there is not one mountain to be seen; the natives having levelled them all . . . this great country is flat, without forests, marshes or deserts, and equally inhabited throughout . . . To this prodigy may be added the admirable uniformity of languages, customs, buildings and other things which are to be met with in this Country. 'Tis sufficient to know one quarter, to make a certain judgement of all the rest; all which without doubt proceeds from the nature of the people, who are all born with an inclination of willing nothing contrary to one another; and if it should happen that any one of them had anything that was not common, it would be impossible for him to make use of it. (de Foigny, 1693, pp. 51–2)

Perhaps we are a little on the conformist side, but de Foigny still likes us, and makes an extended comment on the superiority of our manners and customs over the rest of the world. Even if he sounds like a Channel 7 reporter on the Australian performance at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, he is worth hearing.

> I could not but admire a conduct so opposite to our defective one, that I was ashamed to remember how far we were from the perfection of these People.
>
> Our best morality is not capable of better reasoning, nor more exactness, than what they practise naturally without rules . . . The insatiable thirst after riches, these continual dissensions, these black treasons, bloody conspiracies, and cruel butcheries, which we are continually exercising towards one another; don't these things force us to acknowledge that we are guided by passion rather than reason? Is it not to be wished that in this estate, one of these men which we may call Barbarians would come to disabuse us, and appear in so much virtue as they practise purely by their Natural Light, to confound the vanity which we draw from our pretended knowledge, and by the assistance of which we only live like beasts. (de Foigny, 1693, p. 78)

This is a Utopian dream, but we have, at least in my view, realised a small part of it. Australia at the end of the twentieth century is less violent, less cruel, less tyrannical, less intolerant than France at the end of the seventeenth, although perfection still eludes our grasp, Channel 7 notwithstanding.

Obviously the Utopian fictions tell us nothing about the real Australia in the seventeenth century. What they do tell us is that, in Robert Hughes' phrase, Terra Australis was Europe's 'geographic unconscious', and in that they may tell us quite a lot about the real Australia at the end of the twentieth century, since we are still reinventing ourselves as a continent and a people. That reinventing relates partly to the physical reality of the place, and partly to the expectations, hopes and dreams our forebears brought with them. We redefine ourselves both positively and negatively against a primarily European past.

The European past and present is our cultural and intellectual heritage, not as a kind of finishing school, but as the key to an adequate understanding of many current dilemmas. To understand the force of reductionism in science and some social and economic thinking, you must go back to Descartes; to understand the habits of resource consumption of the Western world, you must study, among other things, the history of the Pleistocene in Europe, and read *Capital and Material Life 1400–1800* (Braudel, 1974); to understand our responses to landscape, study the history of Western art and read Jane Austen.

Our European patrimony is also enriching: to think about the possibilities of urban design, it is well to know Palladio's city of Vicenza, and Aix en Provence,

Seville and Bath – and then there is Venice. Our lives would be unimaginably bereft without Bach and Mozart, Shakespeare and Tolstoy. All of this imaginative world, however, creates images of a human habitat that are sharply dissonant with our own. Here lies the rub, the inescapable tension in being or becoming Australian.

The tension is not peculiar to us. It is one of the continuing themes of Henry James' novels, in which his characters are torn apart by a dual allegiance. Yet it is even harder for us. Despite the differences between European and North American society, the two lands have many physical and biological links, far more than is the case with Australia and Europe, which do not even share something as primal as the seasons.

Dual allegiance is also the theme of Henry Handel Richardson's novel, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. When Mahony, her protagonist, has had enough of the coastal fog and social hierarchy of Buddlecombe in the south of England, he longs nostalgically for 'a really sweet apple' – such as is to be had in Australia – instead of a 'specimen that's red on one side only. I believe England will stick in my mind, for the rest of my days, as the land where the fruit doesn't ripen' (p. 418). The reader remembers, as Mahony does not, that he had longed to sink his teeth into a real English apple some two hundred pages and five years earlier in Ballarat. The reader also knows by now that, whether distant apples be greener or sweeter, it will take more than apples to make Mahony feel at home in either hemisphere. He packs his discontents with him, some of them divine, some mundane. Thus the tag from Horace: 'Those who run across the seas change only the heavens and not their minds', which is recollected by Mahony (in Latin: *Coelum, non animum, mutant, qui trans mare currunt*) when he makes his decision to return to England (p. 319). The phrase means one thing to the reader, and another to Mahony, who uses it to justify the thought that he should never have left England in the first place, whereas we know that it will be as true of the return voyage as it was of the voyage out.

It cannot, however, be wholly true, in the sense that the mind or spirit is unchanged by circumstance. Mahony himself has been changed by Australia, and it is this that in part unfits him for a return to the closed society of rural England. Perhaps we could say that his Australian experience determines the particularity of his discontent, but the discontent itself, the result of individual and cultural background, remains constant. Much of this remarkable novel is an exploration of the range of applications of the Latin tag – of what changes and what is constant as we move between the two hemispheres. That is one of the themes that runs through many of the essays in this collection, with the complementary concern to work out what is enabling, and what disabling, in our inherited cultural traditions, especially in response to conservation and landscape planning issues.

Conservation battles, conservation debates

World War III is upon us. What is at stake, we hear, is the very survival of our species. Speaking as a geologist, I wouldn't bet on it, but we could win a reprieve for a few more millennia. I would be asking for a great deal more than survival, however. I want a rich and varied life for our species in a rich and varied planet, sharing it with a host of other species.

As with most wars, the objective is clear – we want to win – but the goals are

not. What do we want to win, from whom, and above all how and at what cost? The trumpets may sound the opening bars of the chorus of that most stirring of all songs, the *Marseillaise*: '*Aux armes, citoyens*', but we remember the Terror, and all the other costs of that great cry to achieve great ends. In this war, the enemy is ourselves, a complication. All wars are confusing, and they are always accompanied by a war of words and of images which aim to reduce or eliminate complexity. This is partly why their costs are so immense. Think how convenient and manipulative is a word like 'enemy'. Once the enemy is identified – in our case, the Germans, the Italians, the Japanese, then the North Koreans, the Viet Cong, the Iraqis – you can bomb Dresden, Hiroshima, Baghdad, deforest much of Vietnam. One simple word conceals the reality of incinerated men, women and children.

The essays in this book are about landscape, usually Australian landscape and its interpretation. The potter may leave her thumbprint on the base of her pot as an identifying mark. A human footprint in the sand was electrifying news to Robinson Crusoe, and its immediate meaning was unequivocal – he was not alone. But the implications of that immediate meaning were uncertain. None of us is alone, and the sands have been trodden, overprinted, by countless feet. 'Landprints' are the marks on the surface of the earth, many of them made by our species (see colour illustration following p. 78). The sum of the distinctive characters in a given area, whether 'natural' or man-made, can be called a 'landscape'. But although they have a physical substrate, landscapes are also a cultural construct. The ways in which we read them, talk about them, perceive them, work them over, use them, evaluate them functionally, aesthetically, morally: these are all informed by our culture. These are also among the themes explored in these essays.

They are very personal themes. All my life I have been driven by two passions: a love of language and a fascination with the physical world of rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, landform. These two interests have led me into academic departments with different names. My interest in language has led me twice into Departments of English, and once into a Department of Philosophy. My interest in the land led me to take a doctorate in Geology, to an appointment in Geology (at the University of Oregon), and later as the first Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies at the University of Melbourne. Both interests found legitimate expression when I held the Chair of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of New South Wales.

But both have always found expression. My two enduring passions – let us now call them English and Geology – can be seen as mutually enhancing intellectual modes as much as scholarly disciplines. Geology first. It insists on *la longue durée*, the long-term perspective on events, which is why Fernand Braudel is my favourite historian. The last ten thousand years are formally defined in Geology as Recent. In some senses, Geology is ineluctably pragmatic. Mineral deposits, for example, are where you find them, not where you would like to find them or where you think they should be. Geology is driven by meticulous observation in the field, and, in that sense, fact takes precedence over theory; although fact is always tied to interpretation, the inconvenient observation cannot be suppressed, and particularity reigns. Geology proceeds by multiple working hypotheses, rather like the diagnostic procedures of the experienced and skilled physician. The more possible explanations you can think of, the better. You can then proceed to knock out a few, but may still

be left with complementary 'causes' and some uncertainty. There is an irreducible complexity about the natural world.

Geology is global. Political boundaries are irrelevant. The Precambrian in Labrador, Scandinavia and Western Australia is all Precambrian. Granite is granite, wherever you find it. Finally, Geology inclines to a measure of determinism, another bias towards pragmatism, in that not everything is possible. The geology of an area in combination with the climate determines the soils, and the soils, the vegetation; between them, they profoundly influence human affairs. Most historians describe the play and the players, but ignore the stage. Not Braudel, nor Blainey, nor the economic historians.

English as an intellectual mode shares some of these characteristics, especially the taste for particularity, the delight in the infinitely varied living earth. It is also profoundly humanistic, endlessly fascinated by human beings, including all those faces that are usually kept hidden in polite society. As an academic discipline it is, in a way, subversive of discipline. Beneath the robes of the Nobel laureate in Physics, the judge, the bishop, the murderer, the butcher, the vice-chancellor, the dustman, there is always that 'poor forked thing, a man'. The search for that kind of truth, the truth of the experience of living, ignores the signs that say 'Keep Off the Grass'.

Applied conservation

A good part of my working life, however, has been spent in applied conservation and landscape planning for mundane projects such as identifying satisfactory routes for power lines (I took part in route selection for nearly every 500 kV power line in Victoria for two decades, with involvement also in Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory: by force of circumstance, I became the 'power line man' in landscape planning). Other projects included urban design guidelines for Hawthorn, landscape planning for the southern Mornington Peninsula, strategic planning for Phillip Island (all these in Victoria), a review of public open space planning for Canberra, and so on. These were all commissioned reports and therefore had clients, who were themselves answerable to a broader public. There were many such reports and studies. Looking back, I say with satisfaction that my – or our, since it was the Centre for Environmental Studies at the University of Melbourne that was commissioned and we worked as a team – recommendations were nearly all accepted and put into place.

The reports show a controlled idealism: what I tried to do is to understand the genuine constraints, gauge the intentions of the clients, and pitch the recommendations two notches higher than they had thought they were prepared to go, but not higher to the point of rejection, taking care to present our case as coherently and persuasively as possible, using good graphics as well as words.

This is all pragmatic. I was content if the results were significantly better than they would have been if we had not been involved. Although local in scale, however, most of the projects also had implications touching on, although not directly confronting, many of the major conservation issues of the day in Australia. These I take to be: soil conservation above all, and water management, catchment management and the state of the rivers (generally in crisis); coastal planning (still more an aspiration than a reality in Australia); and urban planning and design (a visiting

Italian colleague once asked me 'Why don't you build your cities as if you intend them to last for a thousand years rather than as temporary encampments?').

In my private life I have sometimes manned the conservation barricades, and would like to have stood in the way of the bulldozers in the Daintree. I have also tried to modify attitudes through books and essays. The essays and reviews collected here are intended not so much as a direct contribution to conservation issues as a contribution to the conservation debate and a better understanding of landscape planning. I believe in civilised debate: I want intelligent debate, and I want also to live in a civil society, like John Passmore (see Chapter 21, The perfectibility of Nature). It is an immensely complex debate, because conservation and planning issues reach deep into our economy, our ecology, our society, our language. 'The truth', said Oscar Wilde, 'is seldom pure, and never simple'. The usual outcome of simplifying issues is simplistic conclusions, which often have consequences worse than the problem the measure was intended to address.

I have seen this happen again and again, especially in aid programs in South-east Asia and Papua New Guinea, where I had a review role for a number of Australian Development Assistance Board (ADAB) programs, and also Unesco programs through Man and the Biosphere (MAB). It is extraordinarily difficult to devise and deliver good aid programs to a culture different from ours without disrupting the social fabric of that culture. To give details would need another book. This one is primarily about Australia, but it is difficult here, too, and it is also difficult to display the complexity of the options, since so many responses are pre-programmed.

The survey of the proposed power line from Darwin to Jabiru through Kakadu National Park is a case in point. Ideally, no one, including myself, wants a power line in such an environment, where we go to escape technology for a while, and to submit ourselves to the pulse of more 'natural' rhythms. But everyone, or almost everyone, wants a cold drink when they get there, which requires refrigeration, and the same people want showers, which need electrical pumps (or noisy generators). The National Parks and Wildlife Service needs computers and cold storage, power and light. Many visitors, especially the elderly and overseas guests unused to the enervating climate, want and need air-conditioning – and, of course, Ranger Uranium is there, whether you like it or not, and needs power to run its plant. Ranger provides the power with its own generating station, which also supplies the township and the National Parks and Wildlife Service headquarters. The generating station is diesel operated. The diesel is imported, and government-subsidised – still, in 1997. The consumption is estimated at 650,000 litres annually, to supply one medium-sized power station at Jabiru and twelve small ones, some of which leak, scattered through the region. The diesel is brought in three times a week in huge tankers some two hundred kilometres from Darwin. The Arnhem Highway, the only road, crosses many rivers, by causeway rather than bridges, shallow during 'the Dry', sometimes torrential during 'the Wet', but the tankers must get through. Think of the consequences of just one spill. The electrical power to be carried by the proposed power line, by contrast, is generated from natural gas in Darwin, whence the gas is carried by pipeline from Central Australia, not imported, not subsidised, not significantly polluting.

There were many subsidiary issues other than the two sketched above. The hostile responses to the Draft Environmental Assessment, released publicly, did not

as a rule address them: there was an immediate rejection in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra by some respondents, some of them regarded as the guardians of our environment, to the very idea of a power line in a national park, without any serious attempt to consider the alternatives. Responses such as these do not, in my view, advance the conservation cause, but we are better able to understand them if we see how they are generated by the ambiguities of our attitudes towards nature (this will be explored in Chapter 1, The nature of Nature).

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